galaxy
MAGAZINE

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APRIL 1959

NEW! 196 PAGES

THE CITY OF FORCE
by
DANIEL F. GALOUYE

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KINGSLAYER
by
J. T. McINTOSH

•

THE MAN IN THE MAILBAG
by
GORDON R. DICKSON

•

THE ATLANTIC MISSILE RANGE
by
WILLY LEY

•

LOVE CALLED THIS THING
by
AVRAM DAVIDSON
and
LAURA GOFORTH

And Other Stories

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APRIL, 1959 **Galaxy** VOL. 17, NO. 4

MAGAZINE

Also Published in
Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Finland and Sweden

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Cover by WOOD showing a full house beats togetherness.

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GALAXY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Main offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y. 50¢ per copy. Subscription: (6 copies) $2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere $3.50. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Copyright, New York 1959, by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, president. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

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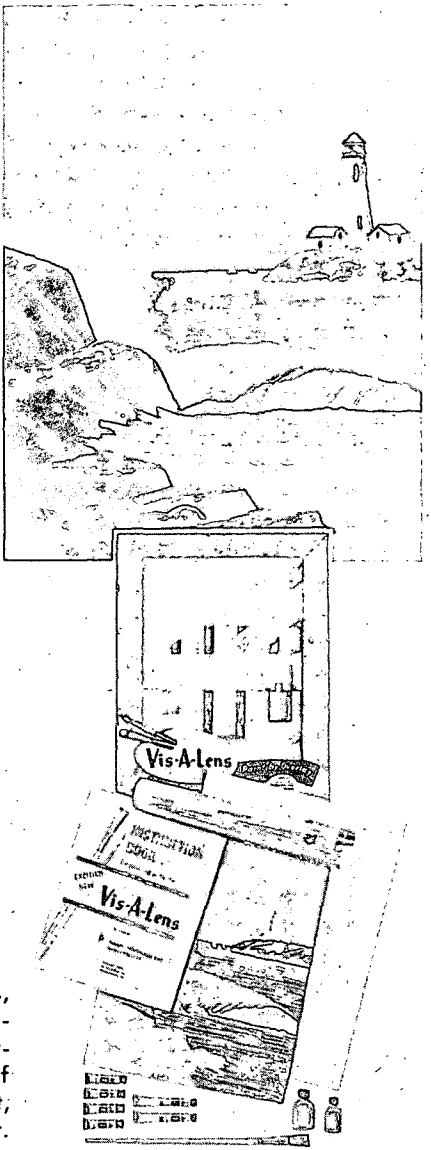

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SO FAR

FOR those who somehow managed to miss the past couple of issues, here is a brief recap:

In going to a big, roomy 196 pages, we have, as we did back in 1950, turned over to our readers every single policy concerning everything that fits between the covers, and the covers themselves — with the assurance, same as just short of a decade ago, that every vote would be counted and that only they would set our policies.

Why? Well, there's a monstrous lot of mystic nonsense written and orated about democracy, but nearly all of it misses the real point: people in general generally know what's good for them. Like a few politicians, a few editors can be spooky in their divining of reader wishes. But why guess when it's only necessary to ask?

So we did, in 1950, and by listening hard and obeying honestly, GALAXY in perhaps the shortest time on record took command of its field — and then crossed oceans into the British Empire, France (including Belgium and Switzerland), Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, with other countries now negotiating for editions in their own languages — to become, beyond challenge, the most widely read science fiction magazine on Earth.

What's mystical about results like those? By doing just what we did, but calling it survey in depth, smart manufacturers put the same phenomenon to work: their customers know what they want. If that's so with impersonal goods, think how much truer it is with anything so personal as one's favorite kind of reading.

Nine years is long enough for tastes to change, new readers to come in, policies to need overhauling. Expanding to a giant new size is the best possible opportunity for updating our poll.

The response resembles a board meeting of thousands all talking excitedly and at once. Spotting the trends is not easy; the figures bounce and jiggle because letters are still — no, by blue, this is no time for modesty — letters are still *pouring* in, fully as many and as passionately helpful as the 1950 flood — and practically every letter has one or more subscriptions enclosed!

Remarkably few readers join Norman Schwarz of Camden, N. J., in wondering "just what effect a letter to the editor has on actual policies. I hope for the best and fear the worst." Most feel as does Mrs. Weston Baker of Clayton, N. M.: "I appreciate the chance to tell you how to run a

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magazine," which may sound cheeky to non-believers, but is *exactly* what we are asking.

Whether a Mr. Schwarz or a Mrs. Baker, however, not much less than 100% are warm in their friendship, keenly intelligent in their preferences and dislikes, so realistic about publishing that one would think they had been in it all their lives — until it's realized they know that the facts of life, economic and otherwise, apply as inexorably to a magazine as a home, a lab or a business.

There are crabs among us, of course, but statistically insignificant. This discovery is a shock every time it happens. More about it later on.

NOW let's start plotting interim curves as well as incomplete returns will allow.

• To begin with, the heart of the magazine — stories. As we said, all sorts of combinations are possible with 196 pages to move around in. Many magazines strive for very long contents pages by using very short stories — often no more than one-page anecdotes — and a medium-length novelet or two. This policy, we added, makes sense *only* if readers prefer clumps of dwarf items to fewer but very much sturdier stories. Well, we asked, do you? Or would you rather have the short stories held down, even if they make the contents page look synthetically hefty, and more novelets and novellas? Or do you have other ideas on content and balance?

Even at this midpoint, with so many counties still unheard from, the trend appears clear: contents-padding fillers are not wanted; full-scale treatments are.

Some amplification is needed here. A number of readers felt we ought to be told to buy material on the basis of quality instead of length. We do, of course, as nearly always as human fallibility will allow. But quality and length are often the same thing: a good story idea appropriately developed, free *both* of padding *and* excessive compression.

For story ideas are more compressible and expandable than you might imagine, and arbitrary length limitations are often imposed on stories — how long they *must* be, rather than how long they *should* be. By not bloating our contents page, we can give stories their head. True enough, writers tend to inflate more than compress, but a good many memorable items have been made so by our asking for fuller treatment — and one of our most famous serials was formed of two intended short stories which, combined, swiftly reached critical mass!

So the question of length vs. quality is really settled only by

(Continued on page 192)

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Its streets paved not with gold but raw energy —sudden murder lurking everywhere—and it was here that a country cousin meant to conquer . . .

The City

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# of Force

BY DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrated By DILLON

I

THE City of Force was a huge expanse of radiant beauty that dominated the plain like a thousand curtains of vivid flame. Staring at it, Bruno pulled his robe more tightly about him and clutched his staff. The bold suggestion of dawn reflected lividly against his thin face. But it was the glare of the City's great sheets of energy — its ribbons and spires of force, its magnificent auras and beams and sparkling discharges — that cast his shadow back into the forest from which he had come.

Resolutely, he shifted his pack to a more comfortable position and continued toward the holocaust of light.

"Where do you think you're going, son?"

The voice, magnified by its un-

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expectedness, had come like a clap of thunder from the trees behind him.

"Nothing to be afraid of, boy." There was a dry laugh. "I'm just a harmless old codger."

Bruno turned and watched the man approach. He had a small, wry face and a fringe of hair that encircled his almost bald head like a wreath. The full folds of his robe only gave emphasis to his pot-belly and failed to hide a pair of dusty, sandaled feet.

"What are you doing here?" Bruno demanded.

"Getting away from the bright lights."

"You *live* in the City?"

"Always did. It's a pretty easy life, but kind of tiring once in a while. Name's Everard." The old man drew up before him and stood staring into his face. "New around here, eh?"

"I'm Bruno, from one of the forest clans."

Everard laughed, his hands outstretched over his paunch as though to hold it steady. "Come for some lush City life?"

"I've come to contact the Spheres," Bruno said stiffly.

The aged face displayed a sequence of expressions that ended in a broad, almost toothless grin and another burst of laughter. "Contact the Spheres? Boy, you got a lot to learn!"

"I know nobody's ever been able to get through to them. But it's got to be done someday."

"So you're taking it upon yourself to learn their lingo, eh?" There was a kindly cynicism in the old man's voice now. "Us fellows who live in the Cities with 'em — *almost under their feet* — can't even do it. And you're going to step in, fresh from the haystack, and show us how!"

BRUNO turned indignantly and strode off toward the shimmering masses of pure force.

Everard shuffled to keep up with him. "Determined, eh? That's the spirit, son," he taunted.

"Beat it, Pops." Bruno put a hand against the other's chest and shoved him off. "I know what I'm doing."

The ol dmat stood scratching his head. "You *are* serious. Ever been in one of the Cities?"

Bruno shook his head.

"They got all kinds of force fields and energy areas. Some of 'em are deadly. If you just touch the wrong glob of light or the wrong wall of ray stuff, you're a goner."

"You live there, don't you?" Bruno asked challengingly.

"Yup. But — don't you see? — I had a ma and pa to show me the ropes right from infancy."

Bruno propped his hands on his hips and stared once more at the City of Force. His eyes swept

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over to another corner of the plain and, in the rising sun, sought out the once-great city of men. Overgrown with trees and smothering in its own dust, it was hardly more than a centuries-old rubbish heap now.

The words the old man had spoken in derisive jest were wise ones, Bruno conceded. He *was* a fool to think *he* could contact the Spheres. Even the great intellects who ran the world of men hundreds of years ago had failed to communicate with the aliens. Otherwise they might have saved their own cities.

"I'm going ahead anyway," he said.

"I can't stop you?"

"Try it."

"Then I'll go along. Least I can do is see you don't get yourself killed right off."

They headed for the City.

"Know anybody by the name of Hulen?" Bruno asked.

"Used to belong to the Spruce clan? Tall, dark fellow who came here about five years ago?"

"That's him. He's my cousin."

"I know him."

"Can you take me to him?"

"Glad to. Leastwise, he's someone I can turn you over to so's I won't have the responsibility."

AN hour later, with the sun beating down against their faces, Everard drew up and tossed his staff indifferently on the ground. "We wait here," he announced.

Bruno glanced at the coruscating curtains and auras and shields of the immaterial City, still miles away.

"What for?"

"There's an easier way than walking there."

"I suppose one of the Spheres is going to come out and carry us piggyback," Bruno said facetiously.

His eyes, however, remained on the City as he tried to pick out at least one material object in the concentration of visible forces — the fountains and hills of radiant energy, the sparkling geometrical nimbuses, the sheets of lazy light that floated from tenuous spire to tenuous spire. But there was none. And yet it didn't seem odd that there should be nothing solid in the City. For the inhabitants, the shining Spheres, were said to be but creatures of pure force themselves.

And even as he stared at the wondrous edifice the aliens had built, a filament of pale green energy arched swiftly outward from one of the lesser structures. Losing its perspective smallness as it approached, the end of the huge tubular projection speared back down to the ground only yards from where Bruno stood.

He turned to flee. But the old

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man seemed unconcerned as he surveyed the transparent chute of restless, raw energy.

Finally Everard backed off. "Get ready, son. We're going to have to keep on our toes in a minute."

"Why?" Bruno demanded apprehensively. "What is it?"

There was an almost inaudible whine as a swiftly moving form came streaking down the length of the force tube, drew to a halt and drifted out the end of the shaft.

The enormous Sphere, towering higher than four men, hovered a few inches off the ground, its featureless yellow surface seething like the disc of the setting sun. Bruno had the sickening feeling that, even though the alien possessed no eyes, it was somehow looking at him.

"Hop!" Everard shouted, seizing his arm.

And even as Bruno was jerked to one side, the play of forces over the surface of the Sphere coalesced into a fierce shaft of jagged light that streaked out to sear the ground where the two men had stood.

"Keep on the go!" the old man instructed. "The stuff he throws is fast as hell. But his reactions ain't. If you move quick enough, he'll always hit where you just been."

Bruno took three steps forward and five to the left. And another bolt slammed down against the ground behind him.

"But — I thought they couldn't even notice us!" he stammered.

Everard, a few feet away now, shuffled to his left, spun around and trotted off agilely in a new direction. He easily escaped the third blast.

"Not notice us! Ha! That's ridiculous. How do you suppose they destroyed all the cities? They see us, all right. But they think we're just dumb life-forms — pests."

Bruno slowed his evasive tactics and almost took a searing bolt broadside.

"Random movement!" Everard urged, panting. "And don't repeat any moves or you'll get it for sure. Still want to go on to the City?"

"I'll make out all right," Bruno said doggedly. Then he noticed that the Sphere's surface had lost its veneer of boiling energy.

"OKAY, you can relax now," Everard said. "It's lost interest."

The old man darted into the shadow of the Sphere, ran around it once and, for a fraction of a second, stood there with his tongue out, thumbs in his ears and his fingers wiggling at the alien. He managed to coax one final burst of lightning from the creature before it drifted disinterestedly away.

"What next?" Bruno asked, collecting his pack and staff.

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"It's happening now." Everard indicated a brilliant speck of green light that was shimmering in mid-air about a hundred yards to the south.

The point began expanding and Bruno watched it grow into a many-faceted geometrical figure. Through the transparent planes of its surface were visible ten or twelve bright yellow Spheres. The gemlike force structure expanded until its top towered scores of feet above the ground. The lone alien drifted over and joined the other Spheres as they floated out through the side.

Bruno backed away misgivingly.

"Nothing to be afraid of now, boy," Everard assured him. "They'll be too busy to notice us."

"Where did they come from?"

"Another world, most likely. One that's maybe not even in this universe."

"But how did they get here?"

"You just saw it for yourself—from some kind of new direction. My grandpa said they're probably coming from another world in this new direction and using Earth as a sort of way station."

"How did he know?"

"Either figured it out himself or passed it down from somebody else up the line." Everard took his wrist and began leading him toward the tunnel of green light that extended like a bridge into the City. "Come on. This is how we're going the rest of the way."

"In *there?*" Bruno shied away from the seemingly solid shaft of radiant energy while he tried to keep the yellow Spheres in the periphery of his vision.

"Beats walking," the old man said. "You want me to take you to Hulen, don't you?"

Bruno gestured nervously at the aliens. "But they're going in the tube too!"

"Won't notice us if we keep down at the bottom. Anyway, we'll be ahead of 'em. Use the green chutes all the time myself—whenever I can find one." Everard stepped in through the glowing end of the tube and pulled Bruno along. "Just relax now, son, and think of wanting to go on into the City and see your cousin."

The tenuous shaft of force closed in pleasantly around Bruno like a blanket of warm, green sunshine. Then suddenly the entire beam of energy seemed vibrantly alive, as though a thousand hands were materializing out of the mist-like substance to push him in the direction of the City. It was like sliding down an endless tunnel and eventually he relaxed and let the forces move him along. The plain below slipped by at an unbelievable speed.

Somewhere along the way, he started tumbling buoyantly in his passage through the green nimbus.

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During his less forceful gyrations, he glanced over at Everard. The other seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the jostling he was receiving from the docile power.

They swept past the outer force structures of the City — past dense walls of lambent light and fiercely glowing pseudo-architectural forms that Bruno imagined might have vaguely resembled some of the buildings of the long-dead human cities.

The chute curved past a great cataract of pure red energy that seemed to be spilling out of nowhere and then it arched down to what appeared to be the ground level — a gently glowing carpet of pale pink stardust. An occasional Sphere drifted along below, either emerging from or disappearing into a wall of shimmering azure nothingness.

II

THE rambling shaft of motile energy curved right between two massive monoliths of pure white effulgence and weaved above a progression of huge, dazzling blue mounds of force stuff.

"We get off up ahead." Everard spread both arms to arrest his tumbling motion. "Start thinking about slowing down."

Like pellets in a blowgun, the Spheres from the plain were rapidly overtaking them. The foremost discharged a lance of crackling light that set up a quivering vibration all along the chute but fell short of its mark.

"They've seen us!" Bruno warned, pulling to a halt beside the old man.

"That's all right."

"But they'll have the whole City out looking for us!"

Everard laughed scornfully. "You must think we're somebody. Back in your village, would you call out the whole clan to help you look for a couple of cockroaches you saw scurrying down the street?"

"You mean we don't even matter?"

"Oh, we're a nuisance, all right," the old man said almost boastfully. "They set traps now and then. And every once in a while they have an extermination. But we ain't so dumb. We know what to do. They end up wiping out only a few of us at most."

Another bolt discharged along the chute, reaching closer to the pair before it played itself out in a splattering of weak sparks that were quickly swallowed up in the green nimbus of the tube.

"This way," Everard said, diving out through the side of the shaft.

His easily relaxed body fell perhaps a hundred feet before crashing into the sloping wall of one of the dazzling blue mounds. He

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bounced twice, almost disappearing into the feathery energy formation each time, before sliding fifty feet down to the surface.

Gingerly, Bruno extended an arm through the side of the chute. Another bolt from the advancing Spheres, however, ended his hesitancy and he dived out, plunging toward the same huge mound on which Everard had dropped.

He was aware of his own voice shouting hoarsely throughout the vertiginous fall. Then there was the soft impact of his body against the force structure's cushioning wall of radiance and he slid down the slope. It was as though a thousand solicitous hands materialized to clutch him by his arms and legs and pass him down, one to the other, until he reached the ground level.

EVERARD helped him to his feet. He stood staring uncertainly at the undulant pink force stuff of the surface that seemed to be rippling around his ankles. Glancing about, he surveyed the somehow not-quite-orderly arrangement of huge but squat mounds of energy that stretched away in all directions, like muskrat hills in a swamp.

"Morning, Everard," a muffled voice called out. "Back already?"

Bruno's self-appointed guardian turned and addressed the tenuous blue wall behind them. "Morning, Matt. How's the missus? Hope we didn't jar you when we dropped down."

Bruno could make out the shape of the man who smiled out at them. It was as though he were encased in the semi-transparent substance of the wall. But he didn't seem to mind his imprisonment.

"Didn't touch us," laughed the man called Matt. "But you probably shook hell out of old Blubber Ball's nerves, if he has any."

More faintly, Bruno could see the huge Sphere moving around beyond the man in what appeared to be one of several energy-free spaces within the immaterial mound. The compartment seemed to be furnished with a fantastic assortment of odd-shaped and odd-sized force of objects.

Everard chuckled. "Wouldn't be surprised to see old Blubber Ball setting more traps from now on. This here's Bruno of the Spruce clan. Brought him in from the forest."

"Spruce? Spruce?" Matt mulled over the name.

"Sure. Hulen's cousin. You know Hulen."

Grinning, the other poked his head out through the glimmering blue material of the wall. "Know him well enough to say you should have brought him a wife instead of a cousin. Needs one to tame him down. Hi, Bruno."

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"Hi, Matt," Bruno returned weakly. "You — you *live* in there — with that Sphere?"

"Where else?"

"Bruno still has to learn the ropes." Everard effected a theatrical sneer. "Then he's going to show us how to communicate with the Spheres."

Matt snickered. "Aren't they all? Give my regards to Hulen."

TAKING Bruno by the arm, Everard said, "Let's go. It ain't far from here."

Bruno tried to stride off, but fell on his face when he couldn't lift his feet out of the radiant pink carpet of rubbery force.

"Don't walk — just *think*," Everard explained patiently. "The force stuff'll take care of the rest."

Dismayed, Bruno watched the old man glide forward without moving his feet as the carpet piled up at his heels and smoothed out in a steady incline before the toes of his sandals. Then, even before he realized it, he also was gliding along.

"A couple or three more houses down is all we have to go," Everard offered encouragingly.

"These are — *houses?*"

"You see the Blubber Balls in 'em, don't you?"

Bruno was aware now that he could make out several of the spherical forms through the transparent walls of the mounds. "And *people* live right there too?"

Everard grimaced disdainfully at his bumpkinlike ignorance. "You sure got a lot to learn, boy."

"How many people live in the City?"

"Thousands. Place is crawling with 'em. I expect they'll have some kind of general extermination pretty soon now and — *watch out, boy!*"

Everard planted his hands against Bruno's back and gave him a shove. Bruno fell forward, skidding across the surface and gaining impetus from the accommodating wave of the carpet.

It wasn't until after the bolt of fierce energy had discharged that he realized the purpose behind the old man's rude action. As he coasted around behind the closest mound, with Everard skimming along beside him, he looked back and saw the Sphere that had come drifting out of one of the structures. The bolt had melted the energy where it struck, laying bare the coarse ground of the plain.

Safe behind the mound, Everard again helped him up. "You got to keep your eyes peeled, son, if you aim to stay alive around here."

Trembling, Bruno started to lean back against the wall.

"No! No!" the old man shouted, jerking him away by the arm. "Look!"

With the end of his staff, he prodded the section of force ma-

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terial against which Bruno had almost propped his shoulder. Contrasting the even blue radiance of the rest of the mound, the small, roughly circular section was a sparkling red. On touching it, the final six inches of the staff's length disintegrated in a shower of hissing sparks.

"Lesson Number One for survival," Everard said grimly. "Don't mess around with no red force stuff."

The old man moved ten feet farther along the wall and stepped through, disappearing into the soft blue radiance like a figure being swallowed by a dense fog. Bruno followed.

INSIDE, the pleasant warmth of the force stuff pressed tenderly against his face and arms and set up a myriad tingling, soothing sensation all along his skin. As though expecting that the coalesced energy might impede his movements, he went forward, perhaps ten feet, with arms outstretched and groping.

Suddenly he was out of the wall again and in one of the inner compartments, standing practically face-to-face with a Blubber Ball. The Sphere's surface promptly assumed the angry appearance of a boiling yellow sun.

Before the discharge came, though, Everard's arm reached out and jerked Bruno back into the force structure of the wall.

"Damned if you ain't a problem, son!" The old man shook his head worriedly. "Now, dammit, stick close to my heels!"

As they continued along inside the wall, Bruno watched the play of ominous light along the Sphere's surface subside. Apparently the force material of the building was solid to the Blubber Balls, but completely immaterial to the humans who resided in the mounds with them.

But even that observation, he decided, was not altogether correct. "Why is it," he asked, "that we can move around in this blue stuff as though it wasn't here, yet it was solid enough to break our fall from the tube?"

"This force matter does what you want it to — within certain limits, anyhow."

Bruno nodded pensively. "We think about it being hard enough to stop our fall and it is? We decide we want to walk around in it and, to us, it becomes as thin as air? Is that it?"

"Right."

"Does it do what the Spheres want it to, too?"

Everard continued on around inside the curving wall. "Yup. Some of it, at least. Never seen 'em do nothing with the blue stuff. But they can make the pink and green stuff move 'em around too, just like we can."

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"Don't you see what that means?" Bruno reached forward, caught the old man's arm and turned him around.

"Nope."

"The way *we* think can't be too different from the way *they* think! We think of different things, of course, but—"

"Look, son," Everard said irritably. "For hundreds of years we been trying to figure out how they think so's we can get in contact. I guess everybody except you knows it can't be done."

"All this force stuff—what keeps it up? Where does it come from?"

The old man made dismayed gestures with his hands. "How should I know? Ever hear of an airyplane?"

Bruno was acquainted with the legend. "Machines that were supposed to fly."

"Right. Now you figure those cockroaches in your village could understand what made them machines stay up? For that matter, think *you* could understand it?"

THEY found Hulen in what Bruno assumed was the rear outer wall of the mound. They had come upon an area of impenetrable blackness in the force stuff, but Everard had waved his hand in annoyance and the blue glow had extended instantly into the murky region.

Directly ahead was a hill of force substance that seemed to be a projection of the pink surface. There was a cradlelike depression in the crest of the elevation and in it lay a sleeping form.

Bruno recognized his cousin and went gliding forward eagerly on the undulant carpet. "Hulen!"

The slumbering man, stout and with a thick cast of contentment on his florid face, stirred lightly and mumbled, "Go 'way."

Blackness swallowed them.

But the light returned as Everard coasted up to the base of the delicately soft elevation. "Wake up, Hulen!"

The man turned over, opened his eyes without seeing anything and was instantly blotted out by returning darkness.

This time it was Bruno who *thought* Hulen's artificial night away.

"I'll fix him," vowed Everard, staring at the comfortable hill on which the man slept. Then the elevation began melting down, flowing back into the pink carpet. Bruno's cousin was deposited on his ear.

Hulen awakened finally, yawned, saw Everard and asked, "You got my new robe?"

"Wasn't ready yet. I'll pick it up next time I go out."

Hulen sat up scratching his head. "What're you trying to pull off, old man? I give you two force-food balls to trade off with

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the forest folks for a new robe and you come back—"

"Brought you a visitor," Everard cut him short, gesturing toward Bruno, who had been standing out of his cousin's field of vision.

Hulen looked around, frowning momentarily. Then his face broke out in a grin of recognition as he leaped up and seized Bruno's shoulders.

"I didn't figure you'd ever make it here, fellow! Welcome to the easy life!"

Bruno returned the special embrace of the Spruce clan. "Didn't come here for the easy life," he said soberly.

"Oh, no! Not another one!" Hulen glanced in distress at Everard.

"Yup. Wants to get chummy with the Blubber Balls. Tried to talk him out of it, but . . ." Everard completed the sentence with a futile gesture.

Hulen cuffed Bruno on the arm. "We'll soon get you off it. Just wait till you see how swell life can be. I know a couple of classy babes—*Elm clan.* You've run across that brand before, haven't you?"

Bruno smiled noncommittally as Hulen's elbow dug into his ribs.

"Gotta be going," Everard said. "Keep a close eye on him, Hulen. He's a natural-born stumbler. He almost got it half a dozen times since I picked him up this morning."

The old man glided off through the wall and headed for another force structure across the way. And Bruno realized, watching the robed figure depart, that he was seeing *outside* the mound for the first time since he had entered it. The wall's outer surface, like its inner one, evidently was opaque as long as he felt no desire to look beyond it.

III

BRUNO and Hulen stood uncomfortably for a while, trying to find something in common to talk about.

"How're all the folks?" Hulen asked at last.

"Fine," said Bruno, and thought what else he might add. "Just fine."

"Old Chief Cedric still in charge?"

"Well — more or less, I guess you'd say. He's been quiet since a Sphere came along a couple of years ago and tamed him down."

"What happened?"

"Found an old — I believe he called it a generator, with instructions on how to get it to work. There were these two glass things that were supposed to light up."

"Yes?" Hulen coaxed, laughter waiting in his eyes.

"Well, he got the thing going with a hand crank and for a whole night it was just like day in his hut."

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"And then?"

"This Sphere came along in one of those green air tunnels and *boom!* up went the whole hut! Cedric was outside at the time, but close enough to get his hair singed!"

Hulen laughed until his eyes ran. "They'll do it, all right! They just can't stand anything that makes that electricity stuff. That's why they blew hell out of all the old cities. The human cities were full of electrical things."

"Now Cedric has fits whenever anybody tries to dig something out of one of the ruins."

"I can't say I blame him."

Hulen glanced tentatively behind him and a section of the pink carpet flowed upward like a growing toadstool. When it attained a convenient height and sufficient rigidity, he seated himself comfortably upon it. Then he indicated a spot behind Bruno where a second mound of force stuff was rising. The improvised seat, Bruno found, was even softer than it appeared.

"You have to learn to do these things for yourself," Hulen said. Then, "Seriously, about contacting the Blubber Balls — I had the same idea at first. That's why I left the clan and came here. I was going to say, 'Look here, Spheres, we're dignified, intelligent people. You can't simply step in and take over as though there wasn't an ounce of brains anywhere on Earth'."

"And you gave up when you found out you couldn't get through to them?"

Hulen smiled. "I got wise, Cousin. What could be better than this?" He spread a hand to include all the wonderful effects of the City of Force. And everywhere the hand swept, the outer surface of the wall beyond it became transparent, laying bare the splendid panorama of the City's magnifcent edifices.

Bruno sprang up. "What's that?" he asked anxiously, pointing outside.

Thousands of fluttering ribbons of silver were extending upward from each immaterial structure, reaching eagerly toward the noonday sun.

Hulen laughed at his country cousin's alarm. "Nothing to be afraid of. Watch."

THE ribbons seemed to be drawing something out of the sunlight — tiny beads of pure yellow energy that formed along the length of the streamers and rolled slowly down until they embedded themselves in the force substance of the buildings. Gradually the beads rolled together, forming balls of increasing size as they sank farther into the walls.

Bruno constricted his vision and cut out the exterior scene. Now

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he was watching the orbs course through the material of their own mound. Still collecting into bigger balls, they continued moving inward until they came to rest embedded in the inner surface of the walls, protruding into the alien's compartments.

One floated close by Bruno's head and he ducked. But Hulen only laughed and snatched it out of the air. He handed it to his cousin and trapped another for himself.

Bruno cautiously handled the glowing yellow orb, acutely aware of intense sensation in the palms of his hands, in his fingers. It was a soothing, comfortable feeling of fullness and satisfaction that spread up his arms and into his shoulders as the grapefruit-sized ball began shrinking.

Dumfounded, he held the thing in one hand and raised the other incredulously to his face. And where his fingers brushed against his lips, there was the composite taste of all the good food he had ever eaten, of the best of the Grape clan's wine he had ever drunk.

"FORCE-FOOD balls," Hulen explained, vigorously rolling the rapidly dwindling orb between his hands and plopping what was left of it into his mouth. "You don't have to eat them, but they taste even better this way."

Bruno realized that until then he had been both thirsty and hungry, and now there was only a feeling of very comfortably satisfied well-being.

"Blubber Ball really goes for them too." Hulen gestured with a casual thumb.

When Bruno looked, the inner surface of the wall was transparent and, in the compartment beyond, the twenty-foot Sphere was drifting along, absorbing each force-food ball with which it came into contact.

The sight of the alien reminded him of his resolve and he rode the wavering pink carpet toward the compartment.

But his cousin Hulen darted around in front of him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I came here to communicate with them. This one's as good as any for a start."

Hulen put an arm around his shoulder. "You've come a long way and had a lot of new experiences. Why don't you get a little rest first?"

A hill of pink fluffiness reared up from the floor and formed an inviting depression in its crest. It was, Bruno admitted, a good suggestion. He did feel tired. Even before he fully decided, however, a wave of radiant force billowed behind him, rolled him up the soft ramp and deposited him on the cloudlike bed.

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ROUSED finally by the sound of amused voices, Bruno elevated himself on an elbow. Glancing downhill, he saw Hulen sitting at a mushroom-shaped table which had sprouted from the glistening floor. Across from him were two girls whose uninhibited laughter filled the inner-wall cavity.

Hulen stared down and a section of the lambent carpet rolled back, bearing a small subsurface compartment in which were stored several force-food balls. He handed one to each of the girls. Then he raised a third above his upturned face and squeezed it like a grapefruit. A maroon liquid flowed into his waiting mouth.

He saw his cousin and rose. "Come on down," he invited. "We got company."

When Bruno hesitated, the mound deflated under him and he pawed the air frenziedly on his way down to the floor. The girls' high-pitched laughter italicized Hulen's guffaws.

He tossed one of the force-food balls into Bruno's lap. "Some of the best stuff you ever drank. I spent all afternoon thinking up a storm — impressing the taste of claret on it."

Bruno raised the ball, squeezed it and drank. It was delicious.

Hulen came over and slapped him on the back. "See what I mean about the lush life?" He winked at the girls.

They were blondes — a general trait of the Elm clan, Bruno remembered. Both were attractive and rather well put together, their figures being allowed some freedom of expression by virtue of sleeveless, low-cut robes and broad, constricting belts. A little plump, perhaps, but not so much so that a couple of months in a forest village wouldn't harden them up and slim them down.

"Bruno, meet Lea and Sal. Girls, my cousin Bruno. He'll be a regular cosmopolitan as soon as he shakes the hayseed out of his hair."

Both girls gave out with delightful laughter. Sal's, however, was more restrained, somewhat less derisive and a bit more sympathetic than Lea's. Moreover, Sal regarded him with interested concern rather than pure amusement. He decided he liked her better and went and sat beside her. Hulen, too, seemed satisfied with the arrangement. It was clear that he preferred someone high-spirited, as Lea seemed to be.

"Hulen says you're going to contact the Blubbers," said Lea, a tinge of mockery in her voice.

But Bruno only nodded.

"It won't be easy," Sal said quite seriously.

Hulen smote him again on the shoulder. "We'll get it out of his system, won't we, girls? A few days of the easy life is all it'll take."

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LEA leaned forward on the table. "You never had it so good, Bus—" Obviously she had started to call him Buster, but had stopped to grope for a more practical word as she regarded his lean, sinewy arms. "You never had it so good, kid."

Bruno realized that Buster would probably be an appropriate name for anyone living in the City of Force. The easy life, with its complete absence of effort, must indeed be conducive to chubbiness.

"Just take it easy, Bruno." Sal laid a hand on his forearm. "Keep your eyes open and watch. Learn all you can before you try to glide off on your own. After a few weeks, you'll know what you want to do."

She was quite young, too, he decided — a good deal younger than the other Elmite. Somehow he had the notion she hadn't been in the City too long. There wasn't the same casualness that he'd found in the others he'd encountered.

"We'll change your mind, Cuz," Hulen promised jovially. "After we get through showing you how rich life can be, you'll start praying that nobody ever succeeds in contacting the Spheres and getting them to go back where they came from."

Sal fastened her eyes on the surface of the pink table and a projection of force stuff shot upward, shaping itself into a goblet. She squeezed the food ball over the container and filled it to the brim.

Hulen tilted his head back again and compressed what was left of his globe into a final trickle of wine. He rolled back the carpet with a brief glance and grimaced when he saw that the cache was already empty, the last of the balls having gone to his cousin.

"Have to round up some more," he said disappointedly.

Bruno, however, was just then looking at several of the bright golden orbs. He had extended his vision curiously into the Blubber thing's inner compartment and had spotted the cluster embedded in the wall.

"I'll take care of it," he said confidently, letting the wavering floor carry him through the inner surface of the wall and into the huge room. He stood on his toes and reached for the food balls.

But a hurtling form came diving through the wall and he looked down in time to see Sal's shoulder ramming into his stomach. The breath knocked out of him, he flailed backward across the compartment and collapsed, a billow of the carpet surging up to break his fall.

Sal, off balance, plunged down on top of him.

"It's a trap, Bruno!" she shouted. "Don't touch it!"

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Hulen and Lea were in the compartment by now. "Boy, is he ever a rube," she said disparagingly.

"Watch, Cousin," Hulen instructed, "and you'll learn Lesson Number Two for survival."

He fashioned a pellet of pink stuff from the material of the floor and hurled it at the cluster of food balls.

As it sailed toward the target, Bruno noticed the tiny spot of red radiance, almost completely hidden by the orbs. The pellet struck the lowest ball and the concealed crimson globule exploded into a blinding flame that surged through half the room before it extinguished itself.

"Bruno," Sal said patiently, letting a ground swell of the floor form under her back and lift her to her feet, "you've got to be more careful. You can't go bungling around and expect to live very long in the City."

She said it, Bruno imagined, as though she were more than casually interested in his survival. Yet the fact that he had to take criticism from a girl was an embarrassment.

He started to get off the floor and two projections of force stuff reared up, each wedging itself crutchlike under one of his arms and providing assistance as they continued to rise. Angrily, though, he batted the props away and got up under his own power.

IV

THE near disaster not only broke up the party, but also brought about postponement of a nocturnal tour of the City which, in Sal's words, would have "brought out the wonderful beauty of the force lights."

Although the experience had shaken Bruno's determination and confidence, by the next morning he nevertheless felt somewhat rededicated to his purpose of communicating with the Spheres. He was about to enlist his cousin Hulen's advice on the matter when Everard came gliding in through the outer wall.

"Morning, fellows." The old man straightened the folds of his robe and scowled at Bruno. "Just heard about your close shave. Ain't you learned nothing yet?"

Hulen laughed. "He learned a lot last night, didn't you, Cuz?"

Bruno looked away uncomfortably.

"Don't feel bad," Hulen reassured him. "I had as much trouble myself when I first came here."

"They all do," Everard admitted grudgingly. "But the easy life is well worth it."

Hulen ordered up three stools from the force material of the floor and sat facing his relative. "Look, here are some thumb rules: The pink and green and blue stuff — they're all okay. Anything bright

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red is deadly. Purple'll knock hell out of you, but it's usually not fatal."

"Orange is rough too," the old man added, digging with one hand inside his robe. "It'll reach out after you and . . ." He drew a finger demonstrably across his neck.

Continuing the search of his clothes, he produced three food balls from an inner pouch and shared them with the other two men. "Figured you'd be out of provisions, so I brought along some breakfast."

Bruno munched avidly on the glowing yellow orb, determined this time not to have it melt in his hands. The taste was curiously like that of bacon and eggs, hot buttered biscuits and rich milk, all rolled into each mouthful. And he could actually feel the composite flavor spreading through his body.

There was no doubt about it, he uneasily conceded — this was the ideal life in many respects. The temperature was always perfect (he wondered to what extent mental control governed that comfort) and one's clothes seemed never to get soiled. Only a half-hour earlier, Hulen had shown him how proper concentration could make the entire outer surface of the mound ice cold, and how the water that condensed on it could be channeled into a tub-like depression in the wall's interior.

Indeed, it was the easy life, requiring no exertion except defensive maneuvers whenever an alien happened along. And he could see that one would rarely be caught in a perilous situation with just a little more caution than he had learned in the forest.

BRUNO glanced around, extending his vision beyond the inner surface of the wall. One of the Spheres was in the nearest compartment. He watched it glide over to a cube of orange force. The color of the object seemed to flow into the Sphere. When only a gray form was left, the alien deserted the cube and coasted to the center of the compartment, where it drew up beside a fountain of splashing white sparks. The orange hue which had once belonged to the cube drained from the surface of the Sphere and became part of the fountain.

The purpose of the function — or ritual? — escaped Bruno completely. He saw there would be no point in even attempting to understand what he had witnessed.

"Eat up," Hulen said, gesturing toward what was left of the food ball in Bruno's hand. "I got a program mapped out. We're going to pick up the girls and show you some of the sights."

Everard sighed. "Let's me out."

"Why?" Bruno wanted to know.

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He was becoming fond of the little man, despite his cynical criticism.

"We never take the chance of letting 'em find more'n four of us together at one time, else they might get the idea we're running away with the place. That'd mean another extermination."

Bruno glanced back at the Sphere in the adjacent compartment. "You go along with them, Everard. I'm staying."

Hulen and the old man exchanged uncertain looks. "Why?" they both asked.

"I'm going to be busy. I don't feel I'm accomplishing anything."

"You're not *supposed* to accomplish anything!" Hulen pointed out. "This is the *easy* life. There's nothing to do, nothing to worry about — if you watch your step. Just relax and enjoy things."

"Don't have to put out no effort here," Everard said, further defining this strange new philosophy of existence. "Nobody in all history never had a better deal. Talk about that the welfare state of the Budding Ages—"

"You fellows go ahead," Bruno insisted. "I have something to do."

"But Sal's expecting you!" Hulen said. "She's the one who planned the tour!"

The setup became even clearer, as far as Bruno was concerned. Apparently it was all a conspiracy to get his mind off communicating with the Spheres. It was all for his benefit, of course. But he didn't need them to look out for him.

"Tell Sal I'll see her later," he said firmly.

EVERARD'S direct stare was intense with suspicion. "What are you going to do?"

"I came here to reach the Spheres. I may as well get along with the job. And here's as good a place as any to start." Bruno indicated the alien in the nearest compartment.

Everard lifted an eyebrow. "Just what have you got in mind?"

"Finding some way to talk with them — telling them we're intelligent too."

"Don't you suppose that if we were intelligent *by their standards*, they would have found it out by now?"

"Maybe they already know we're intelligent," Hulen suggested.

"They can't," Bruno said, "or they'd have respect for other thinking things."

"How do we know that *they* think?" Everard asked.

It had developed into a rapid-fire question-and-answer session, and Bruno wondered whether it might not be intended solely to confuse him. He ignored the old man's last question and said, "I don't think they'd treat us like pests if they knew we were a civilized race. They'd—"

"Ain't every creature civilized

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by its own standards?" Everard interrupted.

"They destroyed all our cities," Bruno went on, "because our cities were nests of forces that clashed in some way with their own setup, or with the Spheres themselves. It's just like when we kill mosquitoes because they interfere with us."

Everard frowned. "I don't get it."

"Don't you see that if we ever found intelligent mosquitoes—*talking* mosquitoes — we wouldn't destroy them? Instead, we'd tell them we don't like to be buzzed and bitten. We'd lay down the law — give them a list of terms they'd have to meet if they wanted us to stop swatting them. We might even help them after that."

"But we can't contact the Spheres!" Hulen sputtered. "Would we notice a particular ant on the ground if it tried to communicate with us?"

"Maybe, if it tried hard enough. Since it would be the one trying to establish contact, it would have to discover the symbols that would do the trick."

Everard laughed jeeringly. "And you're going to look for symbols that'll let us talk with the Blubber Balls?"

"I think maybe some of the geometrical forms they're familiar with might work."

"So," Hulen said, with a disdainful grin, "Old Blubber Ball's going to see you making with some geometrical lingo and he's going to sit down respectfully and watch. Let me ask you this: Do you think a parrot's intelligent just because it can imitate human speech?"

Bruno rose impatiently. "Just the same, I'm going to give it a try." He let the now wavering floor push him along swiftly toward the inner wall.

His cousin glided ahead to block his path before he could pass through into the inner compartment.

But Everard shot forward and a projection of force material sprang up to seize Hulen's arm. "Let him go. If he wants to be a dumb hick, let him find out for himself—if he lives that long."

BRUNO stood gaping up at the huge alien, but only for a second. When he saw its surface cloud over with a threatening play of sparkling yellow force, he hopped sideways and let the radiant carpet carry him several feet to the rear. The maneuver was executed just in time to escape the Sphere's first searing blast of lancelike force, which curled back the material of the floor where it struck.

Still taking evasive action, both under his own power and with the help of the motile carpet of force, he concentrated on piling up a

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heap of energy material in the center of the room next to the Sphere. Another bolt barely missed him before he could manage sufficient concentration to mold the force stuff in a four-foot tube.

Stalking him, the alien drifted ominously forward. But Bruno, bobbing and weaving, prevented the Sphere from getting set for an effective shot. And all the while he kept his eyes on the other objects in the room, making certain he wasn't blundering into any of the red, purple or orange force things.

Another streak of jagged energy leaped from the Sphere but missed by a considerable margin. Following the discharge, Bruno realized, it would be at least several seconds before the alien could generate sufficient energy for the next searing blast. So he returned to his task of constructing symbols of communication.

Glancing back toward the cube he had formed, he concentrated on a nearby section of the pink flooring. Like a geyser in slow motion, the pastel carpet flowed upward, assuming the shape of a lumpy ball. He smoothed out its surface and snipped off the thin stem. To his surprise, the weightless mass remained suspended.

As the alien paused before the two objects, Bruno glided around the room, making the undulating surface carry him left, forward, back, right in as random a pattern as he could manage to make it.

The Sphere loosed another ineffectual bolt that tore the top off the fountain of silver sparks and sent the coruscating material spraying against the far wall. It trickled down the blue surface like stars flowing across the velvet of space.

Bruno maneuvered skillfully toward the center of the room, carefully avoiding a miniature waterfall of intense red radiance that gushed forth from nowhere. The cataract changed color as it spilled down upon and became part of the pink carpet, flowing outward in concentric wavelets. At the point where the red force materialized from nothing were a large ring of yellow energy and a smaller halo of glittering green substance.

He returned his attention to the two geometrical forms he had constructed and began molding a third — a pyramid. With this creation, though, he tried another innovation. While he fashioned it, he concentrated on a different color. And as the pink hue faded from the form, it was replaced by a golden yellow cast.

This object, too, he left suspended while he mentally detached the cube from the floor and elevated it to the height of the first form.

Apparently, he summed up, not only could the force substance be

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changed from one kind of energy, or one color, to another, but it could also be shaped into any form and moved about in any direction or at any speed.

Bruno glanced back through the wall and saw Hulen shaking his head while Everard watched with a disdaining interest.

The stalking Sphere had, by now, generated almost enough power for another discharge. Its surface was ablaze with restless energy that crackled and threw off a myriad scintillating sparks.

Only this time the alien hurled not one but two bolts of destructive force. Bruno easily managed to escape the first. But the second released its full fury on the three geometrical forms he had constructed. They disintegrated, scattering bits of the yellow pyramid and the pink cube and ball about the room.

Again the Sphere began its stealthy advance and Bruno gave way warily. He didn't see the orange cylinder until he had almost backed into it. By then it was too late, for already it was spewing out a spray of solid light. As the meshlike substance ensnared him, searing pain stabbed deep into his consciousness, bringing down a curtain of blackness.

"COME out of it, Bruno!" Hulen's voice, booming in his ear, jarred him back to wakefulness. He lay on an elevation in his cousin's quarters.

"You okay?" Everard asked.

Bruno groaned and rolled over. He was aware of a slight blistering sensation along his left arm, the one that had been next to the cylinder of orange force. His robe was charred and there was the biting smell of burned hair about his head.

The force substance beneath his back reared up slowly, elevating him to a sitting position. A solicitous hand materialized from the pastel matter of the mound and tenderly explored his aching arm. "I— I— Damn! What happened?"

"You stumbled into some of that orange stuff," Everard explained. "Told you to watch out for it."

"Ol' Blubber took another whack at you after you passed out," added Hulen. "But we pulled you out in time."

Bruno looked into the inner compartment. The Sphere having gone, it was now dominated by the red cataract that flowed out of the air between the yellow and green rings. Fragments of his pyramid, cube and ball were still plastered against the wall.

Everard laughed derisively. "Now that you've — ah — *contacted* the Sphere, what did he tell you?"

Hulen roared in raucous amusement.

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Bruno managed a weak grin. "Guess it wasn't such a good idea. But did you notice the three forms I used to get his attention?"

"What about them?" Hulen asked.

"I made them float. I even changed the color of the pyramid."

"So?" Everard raised a patiently inquiring eyebrow.

"I haven't seen anybody do anything like that with the force substance."

Hulen shrugged. "So you did something different. So what?"

"Hasn't anybody thought of studying the stuff — seeing just what can be done with it?"

Everard said irritably. "Look, son. We know what we got here. It suits us fine. None of us plan to go around experimenting to get something better. Might mess things up."

Nodding severely, Hulen said, "Everard's right. Keep away from that experimental nonsense. Leave things like they are. We got it perfect here. Understand?"

Bruno's thoughtful silence was apparently interpreted as acquiescence and the other two resumed their chuckling.

Regarding his cousin's singed robe, Hulen peeled back a section of the flooring and dug out another garment. "This'll keep you covered till we make a food-ball trade with the forest folks."

Bruno rose beside the mound on which he had been lying. More pink arms than were needed sprouted out of the elevation to help him change into the new robe.

"Still want to talk with the Spheres?" asked Everard.

"I see where I made my mistake."

"Yeah?" Hulen prompted.

"It was foolish to try to contact just *any* Sphere."

"How do you figure that?" Everard wanted to know. "What makes you think you wouldn't get the same treatment from all of them?"

"Let's go back to the example of the make-believe ant. Its chances would be pretty slim if it tried to communicate with just any human."

"Why?" Hulen leaned forward interestedly.

"Because it might accidentally select, say, a fussy old woman, or a two-year-old kid, maybe even a drunk or a psycho. What chance would it have then? But if it found somebody in authority—"

"Oh, hell!" Everard broke in. "Let's forget about the Spheres."

V

BRUNO could well appreciate the possibilities of force material that reacted to individual thought, becoming opaque or transparent as one wished. Nevertheless, he turned his back on the

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huge mound and modestly regarded, instead, the clear night sky that shrank before the brilliant display of lambent energy emanating from all immaterial objects of the City.

Hulen, less patient and certainly less inhibited, continued to stare into the mound as he called out boisterously for Lea and Sal to hurry it up for their night out on the City.

An elderly man poked his head through the wall of the adjacent structure. "Knock it off! We're trying to get some sleep!"

Another pair of shoulders and head popped out the side of a second mound. "Quiet! What's all the commotion out there?"

Hulen lowered his voice and cupped his hands. But before he could call out again, the two girls came gliding through the radiant wall.

"Now," Sal said consolingly, "that didn't take too long, did it?"

Her hair was swept up into a double braid that wound around her head like a garland. It gave a classic appearance to her smooth face and Bruno eagerly extended his arm. He realized now that she had seemed a bit plump only in comparison with the inordinately thin girls of his own clan. And for a moment he wistfully wondered how it would be living *permanently* in the City of Force and enjoying all the luxuries and adventures — sharing them all with Sal.

"What'll it be tonight, boys?" Lea asked, her brassy voice cutting off his line of thought.

Grinning, Hulen faced Bruno. "Ever hear of an automobile?"

Bruno dredged up the information from his school days: "Four-wheeled contraption that went under its own power. Saw the ruins of one once."

"Well, we're going to get around tonight in the next best thing." Hulen rubbed his hands together expectantly. "As a matter of fact, it might even be *better* than an automobile. Who knows?"

"Oh, that'll be fun," said Lea flatly, conveying the impression that this wouldn't be their first experience with such a device.

Hulen waved his arms and a section of the radiant surface began reacting to the matrixlike influence of his thoughts. Two broad benches formed, one in front of the other, and they both developed wide, slanting backs.

Hulen extended a hand invitingly and ushered Bruno and Sal into the rear seat. He and Lea took the one in front. "I'll drive," he said, and gave Bruno a wink.

A parapet, shoulder high, reared up all around them and Sal squealed, "Away we go!"

CURIOUSLY, Bruno watched the force stuff ahead of the vehicle flow up into the forward

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parapet, work its way down onto the floor of the automobile, up and over the front seat, up and over the back seat and out over the rear parapet. And all the while the *shape* of the wheelless vehicle — not the car itself — moved forward, carrying the occupants along with it as it gained speed.

The automobile, Bruno realized, was like a wave spreading across the surface of a pond. The water itself didn't move forward; its configuration did. He and Hulen and the girls were part of the wave and were being swept along with it, wholly undisturbed by the completely frictionless flow of force stuff beneath their bodies.

The car, under Hulen's direction, went streaking past row after row of gigantic force mounds, swerving between pylons and spires and sparkling fountains, darting under tunnels of glimmering green-light stuff, curving around ponderous and magnificent edifices of unfamiliar geometrical design and altogether new concepts of color.

Occasionally, they zipped past a Sphere or a group of them moving along the broad, level ways between the force buildings. Twice Hulen sent the automobile in looping circles around one of the aliens and zipping in between the ranks of several of them. He drew a bolt of destructive energy from a particularly irate Sphere, but it missed by no less than a hundred feet.

"No danger here," he reassured his passengers. "They couldn't begin to keep up with our speed."

Lea, acting frightened and enjoying every minute of it, moved closer to Hulen and clung to his neck while he laughed like a youngster bedeviling grownups.

Sal held a firm grip on Bruno's arm and kept her face close against his shoulders to avoid swaying with the motions of the careening car.

To Bruno, the novel experience was an utter delight as the wind whipped his robe about him and sportively mussed his hair. The speed was incredible — easily two or three times as fast as he had ever gone before, even on the back of the Spruce clan's swiftest horse.

"How about it, Cuz?" Hulen shouted boastfully above the roar of the wind. "Won't find anything like *this* in the clan areas, eh?"

BRUNO tried to answer, but all he could manage in the face of the wind was an expressionless gulp.

"This is only *one* of the things we do for fun," Hulen went on effusively. "Of course it takes a lot of practice to do this stunt, but you'll learn."

He produced a food ball for each and passed them around. "I decided on brandy for tonight.

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Take a taste and tell me what you think."

As Bruno expected, it was excellent. But he retreated guardedly into his thoughts. It was clear enough that an intensive campaign was under way to win him over to their way of life, and for the moment he couldn't blame them. In many respects, for those lucky enough to be living in Cities of Force, it was Utopia.

Sal set her liquor ball on the seat beside her and retrieved her grip on his arm. "What did you do in the Spruce village, Bruno?"

"Farmed. Had a place on the outskirts, not too far from the market area."

"It's fun doing things with the soil, isn't it?"

"I enjoyed it." He wondered why he had put the verb in the past tense.

"You don't ever see any soil around here, unless you peel back all the pink stuff underfoot. Then you find nothing but rocks."

"Don't you like it here?" He studied her face, brilliantly illuminated by the intense light radiating from the force edifices all around them.

Her eyes, however, were focused on something remote. "Of course I do. It's the soft life, isn't it? What could be better?"

Yet she didn't sound too convinced.

"I've plenty of friends here now," she went on. "It shouldn't be too long before I decide to set up moundkeeping on my own and get on with my job of raising a family."

"With one of those friends?"

"Not necessarily."

THE car tilted backward sharply and Bruno's gangly legs came up from the floor as though defying gravity. He reached forward frantically and seized the front seat to keep from tumbling out the rear. Sal gasped and struggled through a busy few seconds, clinging more frenziedly to him and trying to pull her robe down over her legs at the same time.

Then Bruno noticed that the color of the force stuff flowing up from the surface ahead to take the shape of the speeding car was no longer the pastel pink that it had been. Now it was a light blue.

After he had steadied himself with one hand and secured a protective grip around the girl's shoulder with the other, he glanced around. They were climbing the steep face of a huge pylon that dwarfed all the other force edifices of the City. It reared so high above the other structures that it would have lost itself in the blackness of night, had it not carried its own soft effulgence along with it.

They swept past a towering fountain of inchoate green energy

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that gushed out the side of the structure and sent its flowing liquid force splattering down the slope, emitting coruscating emerald sparks all the way to the surface.

Hulen turned around, grinning at his cousin's dismay. "Over the top we go," he shouted gleefully. "—And here we are!"

The car leveled off abruptly and jerked to a halt on a small, flat surface that capped the crest of the pylon. Bruno, relaxing his grip too soon, went flying past the front seat and shot through the air, plunging over the brink ahead.

But an alert arm of blue force stuff shot out the side of the structure and wrapped itself around his waist as he started the terrifying slide down the slope. It lifted him gently back to the top and set him down beside Hulen and the girls.

Like rapidly melting lumps of ice, the form of the automobile shrank and lost itself in the level top of the pylon. In its place, Hulen ordered up a table and chairs and spread several liquor balls out before them. The small orbs glowed like golden apples and their radiance blended elegantly with the pastel-blue luster of their setting.

A cool breeze drifted out of the star-filled sky and spilled over the brink of the pylon, to go cascading down on all the lesser force structures of the iridescent City of light. And Bruno let his eyes rove over the smaller, irregular hills and mounds, the cubes and fountains, the serpentine tunnels, the pyramids and truncated cylinders of coruscating energy. Beyond — beyond the magnificent pattern of metropolitan lights — stretched the dark, dismal plain. Out there it seemed like another world.

"Still think the clan life has anything to offer?" Hulen prodded.

"Nothing like this," Bruno admitted. "I never thought anything could be so — luxurious."

HUMAN cities, too, he understood, had arrogantly presented blazing shields of light to the night sky. But underneath *those* lights had been the solid matter that produced them. Underneath these was only more light — and uncanny force matter that became almost anything you wanted it to be.

"This is just a small town," Lea said casually. "I know someone who went through a green tunnel to one of the other Force Cities. It's ten times bigger than this one."

"Where is it?" Sal asked, interested.

"Know the Mississippi?"

"I studied about it."

"Well, it's not too far from the mouth of the river and it's got . . ."

Bruno, whose eyes were becoming accustomed to the splendid

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display of illumination, lost interest in the conversation and stared down on the rest of the City. Now he could see some of the humans.

There was another party of four atop a truncated pyramid a short distance to the south. Closer, off to his left, two men and a girl had constructed a table upon a bulky silver cube. Three parties of four, spaced at intervals of about a block, went shooting down the shaft of an otherwise deserted chute that spiraled around the base of a shining gray obelisk. Below, next to the bottom of their own towering pylon, a huge cloud of pink stuff went drifting by. Comfortably seated on its softness were a man and woman and two children.

There were only a few alien Spheres here and there. For the most part, their movements were confined to the surface below or to the curving chutes of green light. And they seemed never to notice the humans.

"This building we're on," Bruno asked, "what is it?"

Hulen grinned. "Could be their city hall — that's what *you* might call it, I mean."

He looked away, then snapped his eyes suspiciously back on Bruno. "Say, you're not *still* thinking about that damned-fool plan of contacting the chief Sphere, are you?"

As a matter of fact, Bruno wasn't. He had been, until a moment earlier, but now his gaze was fastened on a great waterfall of radiant energy that dominated the City south of the central pylon.

CASCADING down from the blackness of night, the crimson cataract seemed to be replenishing the immaterial substance of the force structures, flowing into and assuming the color of the green chutes and the pink surface, the blue mounds, the silver cubes and the orange cylinders.

It was as though the very essence of the alien City were pouring out of nowhere, spilling in from some unguessable source in another world, another universe. And its point of entry was the mouth of a large yellow ring and a smaller green one that hung, one within the other, above the apex of the cataract.

It was the same arrangement he had seen in the mound's inner compartment when he had tried to communicate with the Sphere. And now, as he scanned the City, he noticed the lesser crimson waterfalls, each surmounted by its pair of yellow and green rings that were suspended motionlessly.

"I said," Hulen repeated, "you're not *still* thinking about contacting the Spheres, are you?"

Sal, too, seemed to be awaiting Bruno's answer, her eyes fixed on his lips.

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Absently, Bruno said, "That's what I came here for."

But all the while he was staring beyond the table, concentrating on the force material of the pylon's surface. He mentally ordered up a slender projection of the pale blue substance, detached it and formed it into a ring, changing its color to a soft yellow.

"He's certainly obstinate," Lea observed, peevishly lowering her chin onto a handlike projection of blue force stuff that rose obligingly from the table top.

"A real crusader," Hulen agreed, with no small amount of scorn. "Why don't you forget it, Cuz?"

Bruno maneuvered the yellow ring into a horizontal position, stabilizing it several feet above the pylon and away from the table. Next, he raised another projection from the flat surface and fashioned a smaller, light green circle.

"Trying to communicate with them might still be a good idea," he offered, keeping the talk alive so they wouldn't notice what he was doing.

"I said forget it!" Hulen snapped.

Bruno sent the smaller ring floating up toward the larger one. "If this building we're on is their center of government, we could make an impressive show out of it. We could get together a whole bunch of people and march—"

"Four's the limit," Sal reminded evenly, as though she might prefer that it weren't and that Bruno could go ahead with his plan.

WITH the smaller ring beside the larger one, he paused, abruptly apprehensive over the results the experiment might produce. He glanced at the others. None of them was aware that he was up to anything.

"We could break the rule of four for something as important as contacting the Spheres," he said, to divert their attention.

Hulen's teeth showed in a look of exasperation. A blunt hand of force stuff reached out from the surface of the table, seized Bruno's robe and jerked him roughly forward.

"Didn't I already tell you," Hulen shouted, "that thousands of people have tried *all* the schemes — for hundreds of years?"

And a dozen tiny mouths had formed on the surface of the table, each pair of blue lips soundlessly echoing the rebuke.

Lea folded her arms disgustedly. "Man, is he ever a creep!"

"I wouldn't say that exactly," Sal retorted.

"Go ahead, side with him!" Lea shot back. "I guess you still got a lot of hayseed to shake out of your hair too!"

Hulen rose to assume the role of conciliator, and the hand of force substance that had gripped Bruno's robe sank back into the

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table. "Look, kids, this is no way to enjoy a night out."

Exempt from the conversation for the moment, Bruno returned his attention to the rings of frozen energy. Once more he moved the smaller toward the larger.

Lea stood there arrogantly, her hands thrust on her hips, as she glowered at Hulen. "I don't expect to enjoy a night on the City with this drip! What's he trying to do, anyway?"

"Whatever it is," Sal said, "at least he thinks it's right."

"Yeah. And you probably do too."

"What if I do?" Sal returned defiantly.

"Well, you can have the lunkhead! We got the best deal anybody ever had. And *he* wants to yank it out from under us!"

Just then Bruno finally got the small green ring centered directly above the large yellow one. He lowered it carefully into place, until the one was perfectly enclosed within the other.

There was a great flare of crimson brilliance as billows of pure energy began spilling from the mouth of the double halo.

Lea and Sal screamed and sprang aside, riding a crest of blue pylon material to the far edge of the truncated surface. Hulen lunged up, seized Bruno's arm and dragged him to safety.

"It's all right," Bruno assured them. "I did it. I made the rings and—"

Hulen and Lea were gawking at him as though he were crazy.

"*You* did it?" Lea asked, her voice skeptical and vehement.

"*Experimenting* again, eh?" Hulen said.

Bruno separated the rings and the cataract was snipped off.

"That settles it!" said Lea. "I'm going home. Hulen, either you're going to see that I get there safely or you're going to stay here with — with *that!*"

Scores of slender fingers sprang up from the blue pylon substance to point incriminatingly at Bruno. Then Lea cast herself over the edge of the mesa and went skidding down the incline.

Hulen caught his robe up between his legs and leaped over after her. "See you later," he threw back. "Keep him out of trouble, Sal."

Bruno watched the pair slide down the slope. As they neared the bottom, a ripple of force stuff built up before them and grew into a restraining wave that checked their speed.

VI

SAL walked to the edge and stood gazing thoughtfully out over the City. "Why did you have to spoil everything and start experimenting with that red stuff?"

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she asked him reproachfully.

Reminded of the pair of rings, he glanced back and, with a brief volition, sent them hurtling away — over the city, past the outer wall of force, through the dismal night air above the plain. He watched the faint, luminous specks disappear over the horizon.

"I thought you were with me, Sal. I got the impression you *wanted* to see me contact the Spheres, that maybe you'd like to find out how this force stuff works."

"But don't you see that's not the point?" She turned abruptly toward him. "The fact is that the Spheres *can't* be contacted."

He pretended to concede the argument. "All right. But why not find out all we can about this force stuff?"

She raised her knuckles troubledly to her lips. "I don't know. I'm confused. Maybe we ought to be satisfied with what we have and not expect more out of a perfect setup."

"But things *aren't* perfect," he pointed out. "Not as long as people like you and me are looked on as pests. Not as long as there are Hulens and Leas who are *satisfied* with that role."

She hid her uncertainty in silence.

"That red energy is interesting," he said, thinking aloud. "All it takes to get as much of it as you want is a pair of rings — rings that can be formed from any of the force substance."

"But why would anyone want that deadly stuff?"

"Because it's obviously the basic force material of the City. From it come all the other kinds of energy matter."

Sal was showing a more direct interest now. "But where does it come from?"

"Everard said the Spheres probably came from another universe. Maybe the red force stuff is what separates our universe from theirs — a sort of sandwiched-in layer. And when you put the two rings together, it opens a door for the energy to gush through."

"What do the two rings have to do with it?"

He laughed. "How would I know? But the important thing is that we don't have to know! Suppose a super-intelligent mouse learns he can produce fire by rubbing two sticks together? He could do it without knowing why, couldn't he?"

AN alarm sounded in the depths of Bruno's consciousness. Then he noticed the pale blue cast suffusing the girl's features had taken on a subtle yellow tinge. Instinctively, he flung her to the floor and hurled himself down beside her. And the pylon sprouted a pair of solicitous arms that reared up to grasp them protectively, like

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a mother clutching her children to her bosom.

The bolt of destructive energy crackled inches over their heads and spent itself in the empty night air.

They both then saw the Sphere that had emerged through an opening in the structure. Its yellow surface clouded over with a faint purple-white hue as it generated energy for another blast.

Bruno shoved the girl over the brink and leaped after her. They went tumbling down the incline together. Near the bottom, he gradually piled up a wave of force stuff in front of them to slow their descent. He enlarged the obstruction and brought them to a complete stop just as they reached the surface.

"You all right?" he asked.

She rose unevenly. Three props reared up out of the energy material to steady her.

"Nothing broken." She smiled shakingly. "Say, you *are* learning! And thanks. We could have both been—"

Her composure snapped and she was caught up in a helpless reaction to the narrow escape. She fell against him and sobbed with her face buried in his robe.

An excessively solicitous arm of force stuff sprang up to offer her the support he was already providing. Angrily, he slapped it away.

"It's horrible here, Bruno!" she said bitterly. "It looks soft and luxurious. But death can come at almost any instant!"

"I know, I know. Come, let's get away from here."

Bruno found he had no aptitude for duplicating Hulen's wave-form automobile. So, instead, he saw Sal home on a simple tobaggan-like contraption. It served almost as well, except that when they neared their destination, he failed to maintain control over the upturned edge. Losing its identity as part of the mobile wave configuration, the forward curve had suddenly swept back, swiping him and the girl from the pseudo-sled.

After he watched her go into her mound, he turned reluctantly and headed back for Hulen's place. Before he could take a second step, though, the inevitable wave of pink force built up behind his heels and began moving him effortlessly forward.

Without resisting, he let the undulating carpet carry him along while he concerned himself with a nagging indecision.

Of course he intended to contact the Spheres! Wasn't that his only motive for coming to the City? But somehow he suspected he might ultimately be diverted from his purpose. Or maybe his uncertainty was simply a reaction to the unreasonable and unexpected opposition he was meeting.

He, Bruno of the Spruce clan,

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was going to come blustering into the City and merely announce his intention of setting up Man's first contact with the Spheres. Thousands were going to strew rose petals in his path and cheer him on like a conquering liberator. Then, when it was all over, they were going to hoist him to their shoulders in a triumphant march back to the clean area, joyously proclaiming freedom from the the aliens.

Nuts! He sneered at his own naivete — at his failure even to suspect the City dwellers might resent his interference.

GLANCING up at the glimmering mounds and towering force structures that were limned brilliantly against the night sky, Bruno felt suddenly depressed. As though in response to his vague thoughts of fatigue and disillusionment, the wave that had been pushing him along washed to a halt and the omnipresent carpet rolled upward in front of him. Swiftly, it burgeoned into the shape of a reclining chair with a stout arm rest that bore an ornately curved pitcher and tumbler.

Within seconds, the surface of the pitcher frosted over, inviting attention to the icy water that was condensing both within and without the container. The other arm rest grew a slender hand that reached out and took him enticingly by the elbow to draw him forward.

He thrust the congenial hand aside and lashed out in a vicious kick. The entire complex of comfort shrank away, flowing regretfully back into the amorphous pink carpeting.

That was his trouble, he decided abruptly. The entire City must be luring him with its luxuries and pleasures, captivating him as it had bewitched Hulen and Everard and Lea.

But then, as his surge of emotional resentment abated, he realized, after all, that the City itself was not a living thing — that whatever it did to accommodate him was but an impersonal manifestation, a peculiar reaction of the force stuff to the pressure of either conscious or wishful thought.

And if Hulen and the others had been captivated, it wasn't as much by the City as it was by their own insatiable desire for the easy way. He was determined it wouldn't happen to him.

He started forward again and once more the energy layer came alive to form an impelling wave. Rejecting the offering, he stamped vehemently on the rippling carpet.

And, for as far as he could see, the ground thrust up a thousand ill-shaped legs, each ending in a hobnailed boot that struck down vengefully in a sympathetic gesture of self-punishment.

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Bruno, suddenly struck with the humor of the incident, bent backward, laughing aloud. And all the extended legs retracted into the parent mass while scores of faces, featureless except for full lips and bulging jowls, materialized in their places. They shared his amusement, roaring in soundless mirth.

Striding resolutely forward under his own power now, he turned sharply around the projecting wall of a mound and almost collided with a Sphere which was just emerging from the blue structure.

Even before he could get set, the alien loosed a searing bolt that struck close enough to singe his robe.

He lunged aside, berating himself for having been caught off guard. As he continued maneuvering defensively, his resentment grew and, almost unconsciously, he found himself swiftly fashioning a yellow and green ring out of the force substance.

While he escaped another discharge, he sent one circlet hurtling to its proper position within the other. When the stream of red energy rushed through, he mentally molded it into a lance of lightninglike force and hurled it at the Sphere.

The alien had been generating another discharge. But the impact of the crimson force rocked him visibly and the flush of yellow energy along his surface was dissipated in a shower of useless sparks.

The Sphere lurched backward, collided with the mound from which he had emerged, bounced off and went scurrying away.

VII

ROLLING over on his back, Bruno awakened to a vague awareness that he was being studiously watched. He raised himself on an elbow and discovered that the crude sleeping mound he had constructed the night before had metamorphosed into a duplicate of his four-poster back home. The spruce headboard was authentically colored and even its grain looked real. The pink force material on which he lay had taken on the soft white color of a sheet.

Everard and Hulen stood beside the bed, looking soberly down at him.

The old man ran a stiff, speculative finger over his chin. "Hulen says you're still thinking about messing around chummylike with the Blubber Balls."

Actually, Bruno was still uncertain whether he should go through with his intention of contacting the Spheres. Would the aliens recognize human intelligence and withdraw, leaving the people free to develop their own world as they had once before? Would there be cooperation and help from the

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Spheres? Or would the result be something awful — something he hadn't even considered? But the men's attitude decided him.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. "I think I'll give it another try. Maybe this round I'll pick the right place and time."

Two servile arms of the floor groped for his sandals, found them and slipped them on his feet. Hulen and Everard watched the interlude with impatient misgiving.

"You're not going to communicate with the Spheres," Hulen said finally, his words heavy with determination.

"What the hell, son!" Everard exclaimed. "You want to bring on another extermination?"

"You ever been in on one of them?" Hulen persisted. "Women grabbing up kids and running for their lives. Old folks like Everard here scurrying for safety and not making it. Everybody pouring out of the City."

Bruno rose and one of the bedposts extended a hand that began smoothing his robe about him. "We might find the Spheres willing to help. Once they learn—"

"Like hell!" Hulen shot back. "The only thing they're interested in about us is stamping us out!"

"They might change their mind if they knew we weren't just dumb pests. Anyway, for every one of us taking it easy in the City, there are thousands having a rough time in the forests. Why should *we* be entitled to the easy life?"

Hulen drew indignantly erect. "Because we are willing to take our chances with the Spheres and the force stuff!"

"That may be so, but the main point is that things are tough in the clan areas because the Spheres own the world. And I don't think the Spheres even realize we're at all put out. So I figure we might as well try to get through to them. What can we lose?"

Everard shook his head distraughtly. "What can we *lose?* By agitating 'em, you'll make 'em aware of our presence. Then there'll be an extermination. Plenty of us'll get killed — we ain't had that kind of big-scale workout in years. And it'll be months before those who are left can get back in the City."

HULEN placed a patronizing hand on his cousin Bruno's shoulder. "We got unwritten laws, Cuz. They say don't do anything to advertise our presence; keep under cover; if you gotta go out of your hole, don't congregate; don't go in the open any oftener than you have to."

Uncertainly, Bruno looked down at his palms. Another pair of hands shot up from the floor to present themselves eagerly for his inspection.

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"Changed your mind?" Everard asked anxiously.

If he had, it wouldn't have been as a result of their arguments. Anyway, the goal of contacting the Spheres had been with him for as long as he could remember.

Still waiting for an answer, Hulen said, "We don't have any courts here, but the boys have their own brand of kangaroo justice. How about it?"

"No."

Everard and Hulen exchanged grim looks.

"We watched you last night," Hulen said. "Know something? You're developing a rare sort of control over this force stuff. Take this bed here, for instance—"

"It's a form of subconscious control," Everard added. "Pretty damned dangerous."

"How so?"

"Why, your emotions can run away with you when you get excited. You might make the energy material do things to hurt others."

"Fifteen, twenty years ago, we had another fellow with the same kind of control," Hulen offered. "He ended up killing without even knowing it. His subconscious ran away with him. They found two guys strangled by hands of force stuff."

Everard winced reminiscently. "Even before that, he gave us hell with his nightmares. The monsters he dreamed up became real — force stuff, sure, but you shoulda seen 'em!"

"What are you getting at?"

"We had a meeting last night—after we watched you put on that show outside the girls' mound," Hulen explained. "We decided it would be too dangerous for you to stay on in the City."

"And," Everard concluded, "the boys said to tell you that you got till tonight to get out."

AS far as Bruno was concerned, that practically settled it. He was just obstinate enough to react the wrong way to their threats. And if the great pylon they had visited the night before was the City's seat of government, he would have plenty of time, before the day was over, to attempt another contact.

The determined manner in which he went gliding through the wall of the mound must have left Hulen and Everard with no doubt as to his purpose.

Fortified by the brightness of a warm summer's sun overhead, the brilliant array of force structures cast an intense glare and he shaded his eyes with a hand as he struck out for Sal's quarters. But when he rounded the next mound, he saw the girl gliding anxiously in his direction.

"Bruno!" She reached him and caught his arm. "They had a meeting last night and—"

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"Yes, I know. They decided to run me out of town."

"That's not all. A delegation from the other side of town attended. On the way home, the whole bunch of them were seen by a group of Spheres!"

He glanced at the broiling sun and wiped a film of perspiration from his forehead. "I suppose that means—"

But Sal drew in a dismayed breath and backed away, staring apprehensively over his shoulder. At the same time, he was conscious of a dark shadow moving over them. He whirled around.

The thing that had seized her attention was a tree. Rising out of the omnipresent pink carpet, it grew swiftly, expanding its trunk, sending out a branch here, a twig there, covering itself with a luxuriant dome of green foliage. Then he recognized it. It was a replica of the shade tree behind his house.

"It's all right," he said, turning back toward Sal.

The shadow of the tree brought a delightful coolness. Its branches swayed gently, sending down soft currents of refreshing air.

She dismissed the phenomenon with a shrug. "About those men being seen by the Spheres—everybody's afraid there'll be an extermination! Some of the people on the South Side are already packing up and heading toward the plain."

"They figure it's going to be that bad?"

She nodded. "Maybe we ought to get out too, Bruno."

He ran a hand uncertainly through his hair. It seemed that everything was lining up against him, trying to keep him from communicating with the aliens.

HE dropped to the lumpy, pink surface. But even as he seated himself and drew his knees up reflectively under his chin, the force stuff smoothed out and sprouted a neatly clipped carpet of artificial grass.

"Are you still going to try to contact the Spheres?" she asked, down on her knees beside him.

"I want to. I think it's the right thing to do. But I'm afraid of what might happen. I don't know what to expect — how the Spheres will react."

"Well, they'll realize we're worthy of their help and respect, won't they?" she asked hopefully.

He didn't answer. Instead, he absently watched all the energy structures around him send glistening streamers toward the sun to collect droplets of food stuff from its rays. Then, as he remembered that he hadn't had breakfast yet, thin ribbons of silver also began growing out of the foliage of the tree. The food energy that condensed on them rolled into clusters and drifted through the

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leaves to attach themselves to the lowest branches, hanging there like golden grapes. He picked a cluster for himself and handed one to the girl.

"They've got to accept us!" he said. "I don't see how they could react any other way. But the others have made me doubt my own judgment."

"You've planned on contacting them for a long time, haven't you?"

"All my life. It's been like a goal."

She grasped his arm. "Maybe it's not so important anyway. Maybe you're seeing it all out of proportion."

"But doesn't the world belong to us?" he protested.

"I don't mean that. I mean about feeling you *had to* contact the aliens. Don't you see that's a dream everybody has, to a degree? It's like wanting to hunt treasure on a desert island, or become chief of the superclan, or — like they used to say before the Spheres — make a million dollars. Maybe it's nothing more than an idle childhood fancy that you've viewed out of proportion. But even if you don't contact the Spheres, you've been luckier than most. You've come to the City. You've had a chance at your goal."

"Sal—" He placed a hand over hers, not quite sure what he wanted to say. "Would you go back to the Spruce clan with me — now?"

She fixed her eyes on an iridescent spire and said, "Yes, if you want me to."

He glanced at her hair, gold like the color of a food ball filled with energy and sustenance from the sun, and at her eyes, more deeply blue than the most vivid mound in the radiant City.

"Thanks," he said, rising resolutely. "That's what I want too. But I'm going through with what I came here for."

VIII

A BRANCH of the tree, absorbing its foliage to develop a hand, reached down and tugged urgently on his robe. Another grew a half-balled fist with a long, curving finger that tapped him insistently on the shoulder and pointed behind him. Only then did he realize that what he had mistaken for the sibilant swish of leaves over the past few seconds had actually been whispered voices.

He whirled around. On the other side of the tree Hulen, Everard and a score other robed figures were advancing furtively. Knowing they had been discovered, the crowd of men drew erect with determination.

"Don't try to pull anything fancy with the force stuff," Everard warned gruffly.

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Hulen gestured with a fist. "We brought along enough help to override your control, no matter how good you are."

Several hostile arms of force material sprang up all around Bruno and jockeyed for vantage points. He gave Sal a shove and sent her coasting away on a hastily devised sled. The tree, which he had been maintaining with a practically subliminal intent, collapsed and was quickly reabsorbed by the radiant carpet.

"So you're going to go through with it anyway?" Everard laughed challengingly.

"Look, Cuz," Hulen said. "You already got us in enough trouble, but maybe it ain't too late. How about clearing out without raising any more stink?"

"You said I had till tonight."

"We changed our minds. Out you go *now!*"

One of the arms of force darted forward, seized his robe and spun him around. Another changed instantly into a booted foot and aimed a kick that only grazed his thigh.

Bruno sent the pink stuff billowing up in a great wave which swept down on the others. But a second enormous swell formed in front of the first and met it in a head-on clash that shot a geyser of radiance skyward along the entire front.

The nearest menacing arm developed a gigantic hand which thrust forward and caught Bruno in its grip, pinning his elbows to his side. Before the breath could be squeezed out of him, though, he went on the defensive — half a dozen smaller arms materialized beside him to grapple with the attacking hand, prying it loose and forcing it back down into the parent mass.

But the force carpet convulsed suddenly beneath him and he lost his balance, falling over forward. With the speed of striking snakes, tendril after tendril lashed out of the sea of pink substance, ensnaring his arms and fastening him against the surface.

A gigantic fist came crashing against his temple and drew back for another blow. He shook his head to clear it, glanced at the others. They were still compactly assembled, faces tense with the mental effort behind their assault.

THEN he noticed the halo of green force material hovering several feet above them. It wasn't until he watched the yellow circlet rise like a smoke ring from the surface, however, that he realized his own unconscious direction was behind the preparation to send a stream of deadly red energy pouring down on his attackers.

He halted the meeting of the rings. Hulen and Everard were, after all, only following their con-

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victions. And even though they were fanatically resisting the threat to their easy life, *they* weren't out to kill *him.*

He summoned the rings forward to a point halfway between himself and the others. Then he moved one decisively within the other. The coruscating flow of crimson energy gushed forth, cascading down to the surface.

There was instant defeat in the terrified expressions of the others as they retreated before the cataract. Everard bolted first, scurrying for the closest mound.

The tendrils that had held Bruno captive relaxed their grip and slipped off. And, all around him, the other threatening projections of force stuff melted away as Hulen and the rest of the group followed Everard in full flight.

Bruno swiftly regained his feet and, with a casual hand gesture, separated the rings. The energy flow ceased and he turned to look for Sal.

But suddenly she went streaking past, frenziedly gliding away on an erratic wave of propelling force. She was headed for the same mound into which the others had disappeared.

Even before he turned to see what had frightened the girl, he knew what he would find there.

The huge Sphere, faint ripples of quiescent energy coursing languidly across its surface, confronted him. It was as though somewhere deep within the alien form there was a pair of hidden eyes that held him in a speculative stare.

But there was no violent display of coalescing energy across the thing's surface. And it wasn't advancing. Instead, it drifted slowly — curiously? — over to the pair of rings Bruno had molded.

The impulse to follow the others in flight abated and was quickly replaced by the triumphant awareness that here, at last, was the opportunity to reach his goal. Here, finally, was a Sphere whose first reaction to the presence of a human wasn't a vengeful, impulsive lance of lethal energy — a Sphere whose inquisitiveness invited trial of Bruno's plan to contact the aliens.

He felt both humble and proud as he realized that within his reach was the goal of a lifetime — that now he might accomplish the purpose which had drawn him through miles of forest and across stretches of plain to the City of Force.

And when he returned to his clan, he might well be bringing the news that the period of Man's humiliation upon his own world was at an end.

The Sphere drew up before Bruno's hovering rings and remained motionless for perhaps two minutes. Then, obviously in compliance with the alien's direction,

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the circlets came together suddenly and released a spurt of fiery energy. They separated again and drifted to a new position near Bruno.

ALTHOUGH there were no discernible features on the Sphere's surface, Bruno imagined the creature had turned to "face" him expectantly and observe what he, in turn, would do with the pair of force objects.

He ordered one halo inside the other, producing another brief gusher of crimson force.

The alien conjured up two new rings from the glimmering material of the surface and used them to create a waterfall of radiant energy.

Bruno duplicated the feat without hesitation.

And, as the Sphere drifted animatedly around in an expression of excitement, Bruno was even more exultant in the conviction that at last his efforts were meeting with full success. Now he could almost sense the sudden respect the alien creature must feel toward him. He drew haughtily erect with newfound self-assurance and dignity.

But wait — there was more!

As the Sphere towered over him, he was aware of a curious sensation at the back of his eyes. Or maybe it was deep within his inner ears. The vague "feeling," however, wasn't restricted to his sight and hearing. It was something he could even taste and smell.

Frightened by the incomprehensible assault on all his senses at the same time, he gave ground. But a calm sensation of satisfaction and reassurance swept over him and he was at once certain there was no immediate danger.

He closed his eyes and his perception of things that had no apparent existence became stronger, more vivid. It was as though he could still "see" the Sphere and as though the alien had extended a gossamer web of light and sound, feeling, taste and smell toward him.

In his hyperphysical perception, Bruno eagerly watched himself put forth a similar bridge of communicative thought toward the Sphere — a web that might have been woven of imperceptible force threads.

There was an abrupt meeting of the two projections and instantly Bruno's mind seemed to be caught up in a vortex of ideas and symbols — words that weren't words at all but more like fierce, raw units of basic meaning, stripped of all linguistic character.

It was as if he were encountering the symbols for the first time and indelibly learning their meaning simultaneously.

If he had been called upon to translate the impressions, the

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closest he could have come to transposing them into language would have been: "What the hell, little vermin! What gives?"

BUT there was no threat behind the communication, only amused excitement and intense curiosity.

Bruno pressed his success and quickly sent back picture images of men — proud men — and the knowledge at their disposal. In one great outburst of emotion, he presented the case of humanity surrounded by its once-huge cities and vast and intricate machines, of Man the thinker, dealing in abstract thought, of Man the experimenter, traveling in his land, air and underwater contraptions.

He conjured up idea pictures of people in their compact and efficient settlements, and he even threw in the concept of destructive and annoying insects and rodents and small winged creatures that always followed humans wherever they went.

These, he proposed with great dignity, were the pests — the real pests. Not Man himself.

In his next series of picture symbols, he likened humanity to the Spheres and offered the suggestion that there should be intellectual kinship between the two species.

To demonstrate his point, he transmitted the formula for the

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circumference of a circle, the recipe for making corn pone, the number of feet in a mile, how to find the height of a tree by triangulation, the method of determining the volume of a sphere.

Bruno felt reasonably certain that the last bit of knowledge he had offered in evidence, hitting close to home as it did, was bound to gain a special degree of respect from the alien.

And he knew he was succeeding! He was convinced the Sphere was tremendously impressed by his mental qualifications, by the intelligence of humanity as a whole. Moreover, he suspected that the alien must now be regretting its race's arrogance and disdain over the centuries for the creatures they had regarded only as vermin nuisances.

This last thought, too, he sent over the web of communication — in the form of a mildly chiding question.

The gossamer bridge of empathy quivered with the surprised incredulity of the Sphere. And a swell of conceptual impulses flooded Bruno's senses and arranged themselves into a meaningful sequence: "Is true, ugly little pest?"

Bruno began a discourse on the cultural achievements of mankind.

But the alien cut him short with another avalanche of picture images and symbols that somehow managed to seem like words: "Collector ring trick — each pest can tap all-powerful force?"

Bruno responded with a convincing surge of affirmation. No sense in letting the Sphere find out the others were too content with their roles as parasites even to think of experimenting with the force substance.

"Do it again, the collector ring feat," the Sphere urged against a background of persistent skepticism.

Breaking contact with the creature, Bruno directed the formation of another pair of halos from the sparkling carpet. He tinted them yellow and green and willed their mid-air meeting. He let the crimson force pour through momentarily, then separated the circlets.

"Is enough," the alien conceded, beginning to move about excitedly once more.

IX

THERE was an abrupt, thunderous surge of thought from the Sphere. Only this time it wasn't directed at Bruno. Rather, it seemed to spread out over the immediate area and toward the center of the City. He recognized the purpose behind this flow of pure meaning that required no medium of language for transmission. It was an anxious summoning of other nearby aliens, of

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those of authority who were elsewhere in the City.

And the response was almost instantaneous. Spheres came drifting out of their mounds, discharging paraphysical emanations of curiosity and surprise.

Bruno glanced back at the strucin which Sal and the others were hiding. Most of them were now staring puzzledly out at him and the aliens. They couldn't know what was going on, but it wouldn't be long before they would find out.

There were more than a score of Spheres collected around him and the other alien now, all directing eager questions at the latter. And as Bruno acquired more experience with direct psychic communication, it was even easier for him to understand the exchange of meaning among the creatures.

He gathered eventually from their conversation that the alien with which he had established contact was 3.14. gM.

A huge tube of green radiance came hurtling over the nearby force structures and arched down to the surface. Two Spheres zipped down the shaft and drifted out its end. They hurried over to 3.14. gM.

Bruno only stood there, waiting patiently. The next move, after all, was up to them.

"Is this the super-pest?" one of the newcomers asked skeptically, the direct flow of meaning seeming to come through to Bruno not quite as crudely as before.

"This is the one, Excellency," 3.14. gM replied respectfully. "You will observe it is not scurrying away."

"You probably tried to stomp it and only scored a near miss."

"Oh, no, Excellency! It converses rationally. It knows how to manipulate the collector rings."

Evidently they weren't aware that, by virtue of the psychic bridge 3.14. gM had helped him construct, Bruno was attuned to their exchange. Or, if they were, they were ignoring it.

"Are you sure you haven't taken on too much of a charge?" asked the other tube-traveling Sphere.

"Of course not, Eminence. Test it for yourself and you'll see."

Bruno shifted uneasily before the creatures, realizing only now the compromising position he was in. If anything should go wrong, he was virtually hemmed in by an entire assembly of Spheres. But, of course, nothing *could* go wrong.

Still, Excellency and Eminence were emitting disconcerting emanations, as were all the other aliens in the circle. Nor was there anything markedly friendly about their paraphysical background hum.

"We shall see that it's properly tested," Excellency promised disdainfully. "But first, just in case it should check out as intelligent,

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we'll prepare an immediate extermination and nip this thing before it starts."

BRUNO rocked back incredulously. Extermination! What did the Sphere mean by that?

"Even if it's not true that they're growing intelligent," Eminence stated, "an extermination is long overdue. I'm glad this happened, if that's what it takes to get some action."

Eminence went streaking back to the green tube.

Excellency drifted over toward Bruno and 3.14. gM followed close behind.

"I do hope you're wrong," said Excellency, badly upset. "We've been plagued enough by these creatures, considering that they're mere vermin. Great Energy! Think how awful it would be if it turned out that they were smart enough to manipulate *our own* basic forces!"

So that was it! Horrified, Bruno shrank away from the pair of Spheres. He felt the vivid bridge of direct communication spread out from Excellency to engulf him. Desperately, he fought to avoid contact. He forced his attention away from the creatures surrounding him, away from the City itself. And he dwelled, instead, on the simple thought of an idle stroll through the forest — a mental preoccupation that would betray nothing of the intellectual complexity of Man. Maybe he could discredit 4.13. gM's credibility. At least he had the caustic skepticism of Excellency on his side. And all the while he could sense the alien's examining, questioning probe.

After the pressure finally let up, Bruno gingerly extended an imperceptible web of psychic perception toward the others.

"I see nothing intelligent in this creature," Excellency told 3.14. gM quite angrily.

"But that's impossible! It has orderly thoughts! It can — Pest thing!" 3.14. gM's attention was suddenly directed full on Bruno. "Form the rings! Collect the basic force! Show Excellency!"

There was a burst of peevish amusement from Excellency, then a facetious taunt: "Yes, creature, form the rings and tap the energy!"

Bruno inched away from the pair of Spheres and glanced hopelessly around for a breach in the circle of aliens. A projection of force material rose obligingly from the surface and started to form a hand to point the way. But he stomped it down deliberately, determined not to betray his facility with the energy stuff.

"Intelligent indeed!" said Excellency scornfully, jeering at Bruno's action.

"But," 3.14. gM began, "I tell you it did — "

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"Enough! First X2.718 reports being attacked by one of these creatures. And now this!"

"But that *proves* it, doesn't it?"

"It proves nothing! X2.718 has already submitted himself for shock rebalancing. After this demonstration of hysteria, I suggest you do the same."

The concept translated as "suggest," but actually was much more severe. Bruno was aware of the intense emanation of confused fear that poured from 3.14. gM. The Sphere lunged backward, bolted through the circle of aliens and lumbered off between two mounds.

"After him!" Excellency ordered.

Bruno barely escaped being trampled in the rush of alien forms past him. He conjured up an immense wave of propelling force and let himself be washed off toward the mound where Sal was hiding.

Grim-faced, Hulen and Everard came out to meet him.

"EX-TERM-E-NASHUN!" The frenzied cry came from the direction of the next mound.

The wave form dissipated beneath Bruno, lowering him back to the surface, as he turned his attention to the new distraction. Sal and the others came out of the mound and stared off into the distance.

"Ex-term-e-nashun! Ex-term-e-nashun!"

A robed figure came into sight, gliding forward, occasionally losing control over his propelling wave, tripping and falling.

"They're coming from the south!" he shouted at the group. "Spread the warning!"

Hulen and the others exchanged frightened glances, then turned and shot away in various directions.

Sal glided over and seized Bruno's hand. "We've got to get out of the City! They're coming with the red stuff! It goes through everything — nothing can stop it!"

People were pouring out of the mounds now, stumbling over themselves in a frantic rush for the outer force walls.

And yet Bruno resisted the girl's insistent tug, his eyes focused sickly on infinity.

"I was wrong, Sal," he said. "To Hulen and Everard, I was nothing more than a pest that they had to put up with. Oh, they figured all along they might have to get tough to keep me from going through with my plan. But when they found out I had a special control over the force stuff, I was no longer a simple inconvenience. I became an intolerable nuisance."

"There's no time to discuss it, Bruno! We've got to get out!"

With her words, several decidedly feminine arms reached up from the radiant carpet to pull urgently on his robe.

"It would be the same thing if

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we contacted the Spheres and proved we're intelligent creatures," he continued soberly. "As long as they think we're just dumb pests, they won't mind us hanging around, if we don't disturb them too much. But if they learn we have brains too, then they'd really go to work on us — in the City, in the forests, everywhere!"

He moved forward slowly, his preoccupation creating a resistance that made it harder for Sal to manipulate her wave of propulsion.

"It would be the same thing," he concluded, "if we suddenly found out mice were many times more intelligent than we supposed. We wouldn't greet them with open arms. We'd be all the more determined to stamp them out, because we'd know that smart mice would be much more of a menace than dumb ones."

BRUNO glanced back at the line of Spheres, then turned and fled with the girl. He would have liked to stay behind for a while and see how they would react to a few really searing blasts of crimson energy from the double rings.

But then he realized that the point was *not* to let them know what formidable foes the humans would someday make — given enough time to build their own cities of force and learn more about manipulating the energy.

Sal tightened her grip on his hand. "Those rings — they're following us, Bruno!"

He looked back. Only a few feet behind and above them, the yellow and green circlets that had hovered over the heads of Hulen's group came drifting along like trained birds.

Bruno smiled appreciatively. It was as though the rings, which were actually reacting to his unconscious directives, were well ahead of him in foreseeing the need he would soon have for them.

In a moment, they were through the glistening white outer wall. Their smooth glide stopped as the propelling wave form ran out of the pink radiance and came to an end.

He stood briefly at the foot of the wall and watched the exodus of humans, stumbling across the rock-strewn plain and filtering into the forest.

With an expression of patient sympathy, Sal gazed after them. "It'll be months before they can get back into the City."

"If we can round them up," he said, "I don't think they'll ever want to go back."

She looked puzzedly at him.

He sent his two force rings drifting ahead and positioned the smaller within the larger. As the cataract of raw red energy poured forth, he changed it into pink radiance. Then he sent the rings

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floating toward the forest, letting them lay down a narrow carpet of pastel stardust.

The bulky proportions of a river barge took shape before them, centered on the glistening strip, and several courtly hands stretched out to help him and the girl aboard.

Smoothly, the craft moved off, maintaining a distance of several feet behind the radiant waterfall that provided the substance for its form.

As they drifted along, the river of light dissipated into nothingness behind them, leaving once again only the bare plain.

And, in their wake, scores of hands reared above the surface of the pseudo-stream to wave farewell.

— DANIEL F. GALOUYE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

FORECAST

Putting the next issue together is an exciting guessing game, and as you can probably sense in this one, we're having fun with it. We intend to go right on seeing how many different combinations can be found. In this issue, for instance, are one novella and two novelets that are regulation length; they'd have fitted fine, no trouble at all, into the old GALAXY. But the five short stories, without a skinny little vignette or squib with a title among them? And the expanded editorial? Not a chance! They'd have exploded the works!

Well, let's start the next issue with another challenge:

There's a big — but *big* — novella on hand by Frederik Pohl that would have jammed all else against the walls like a circus giant in a subway train at rush hour. Too huge to be a novella, not long enough to be a serial, it frustratingly stood around in Pohl's workshop with absolutely no place to go. Instead of asking you to be surprised how many stories are not being written because they can't be housed in any ordinary magazine, we'd rather have you rejoice with us that now we can invite the authors to go right ahead and write them.

Pohl's burly — novella? Short novel? We'll call it novella, but you know what we mean. In his novella, there are the most sinister aliens you've ever met, sinister not because they are hostile, but because they are not! They merely have to know all about us — whatever makes us go, whatever makes us stop, but particularly — WHATEVER COUNTS.

And with that towering, powerful Pohl story to build an issue around, the supporting cast of stories and features can't, we assure you, be anything but interesting!

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security plan

By JOSEPH FARRELL

I had something better than investing for the future . . . the future investing in me!

Illustrated by WOOD

"MY mother warned me," Marilyn said again, "to think twice before I married a child prodigy. Look for somebody good and solid, she said, like Dad — somebody who will put something away for your old age."

I tapped a transistor, put a screwdriver across a pair of wires and watched the spark. Marilyn was just talking to pass the time. She really loves me and doesn't mind too much that I spend my spare time and money building a time machine. Sometimes she even believes that it might work.

She kept talking. "I've been thinking — we're past thirty now and what do we have? A lease on a restaurant where nobody eats, and a time machine that doesn't work." She sighed. "And a drawerful of pawn tickets we'll never be able to redeem. My silver, my camera, my typewriter . . . "

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I added a growl to her sigh. "My microscope, my other equipment . . ."

"Uncle Johnson will have them for *his* old age," she said sadly. "And we'll be lucky if we have *anything*."

I felt a pang of resentment. Uncle Johnson! It seemed that every time I acquired something, Uncle Johnson soon came into possession of it. We'd been kids together, although he was quite a few years older, a hulking lout in the sixth grade while I was in the first, and I graduated from grammar school a term ahead of him. Of course I went on to high school and had a college degree at fifteen, being a prodigy. Johnson went to work in his uncle's pawn shop, sweeping the floor and so on, and that's when we started calling him Uncle.

This wasn't much of a job because Johnson's uncle got him to work for almost nothing by promising he would leave him the pawn shop when he died. And it didn't look as if much would come of this, because the uncle was not very old and he was always telling people a man couldn't afford to die these days, what with the prices undertakers were charging.

BEFORE I had even started to shave, I had a dozen papers published in scientific journals, all having to do with the nature of time. Time travel became my ambition and I was sure I saw a way to build a time machine. But it took years to work out the details, and nobody seemed interested in my work, so I had to do it all myself. Somehow I stopped working long enough to get a wife, and we had to eat. So we ran this little hash house and lived in the back room, and at least we got our food wholesale.

And Johnson's uncle fell down the cellar stairs and split his skull open. So Johnson became the owner of a thriving business after giving his uncle a simple funeral, because he knew his uncle wouldn't have wanted him to waste any more money on that than he had to.

"But we have a time machine," Marilyn said fondly. "That's something Johnson would give us a lot on — if it worked."

"We *almost* have a time machine," I said, looking around at my life's work. Our kitchen was the time machine, with a great winding of wires around it to create the field I had devised. The doors had been a problem that I solved by making them into switches, so that when they were closed the coils made the complete circuit of the room.

"Almost," I repeated. "After twenty years of work, I am through except for a few small items—"

I looked at her pleadingly.

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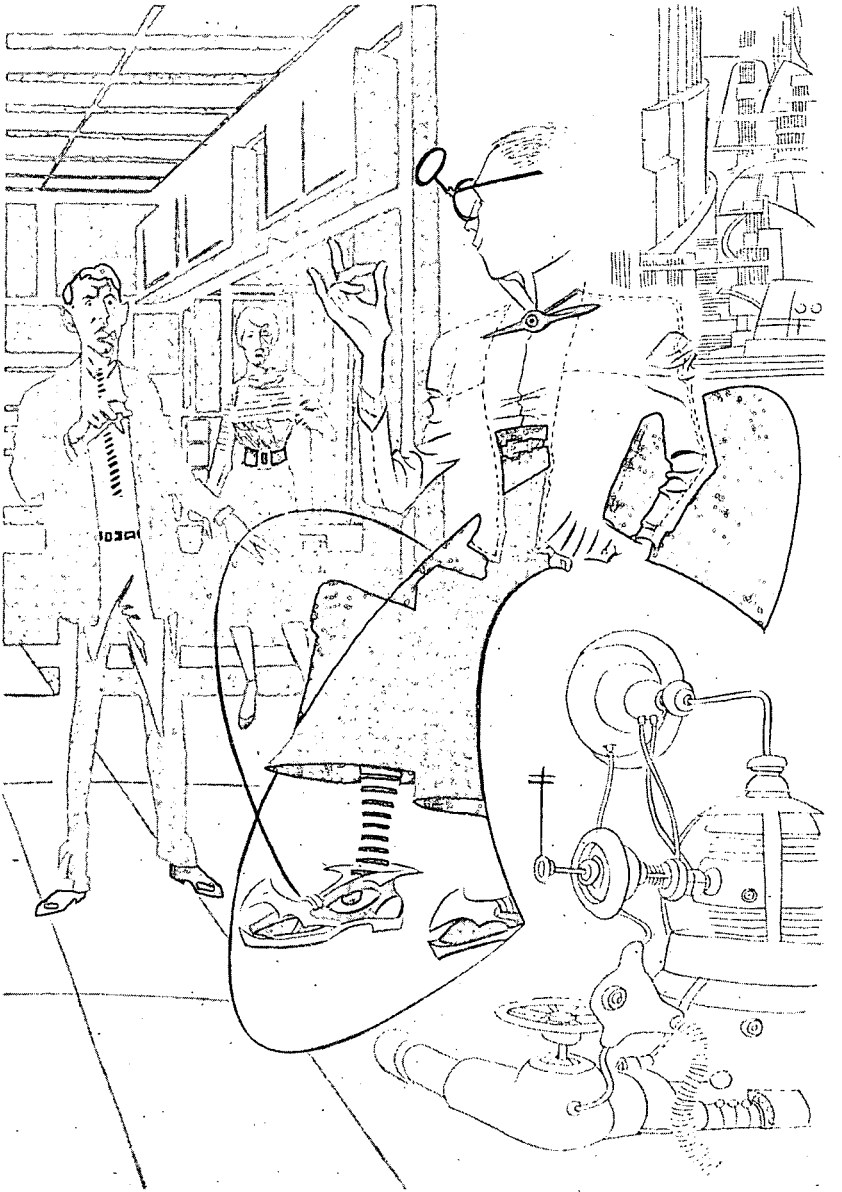

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"It will run about twenty dollars. Do you think—?"

She didn't care much for the idea, but finally she slid off the wedding ring.

"You'll redeem this first thing, Ted? Before any of the rest of the stuff?"

I promised and took off at a dead run.

Johnson didn't have to inspect the ring; he'd seen it before, and he counted out twenty dollars. That was the only item he'd give me a decent price on. He knew I'd be back for it.

"How's the time machine coming along, Ted?" He had a little smirk, the way some people do when they hear I'm building a time machine. "Get in touch with Mars yet?"

"I have no interest in Mars," I told him. "I plan to make contact with the future — about thirty years from now. And for your information, the time machine is practically finished. The first test will be tonight."

He wasn't smirking now, because he never forgot the way I passed him in school and he had a good respect for my brain. He looked a little thoughtful — only a little, because that's all he was capable of.

"You get to the future, Ted, suppose you bring me a newspaper. I'll make it worth your while. I've always treated you fair and square, Ted, now haven't I?"

I looked over his shelves. Too many of those dust-covered items were mine. And I didn't have to be a telepath to know what he was thinking.

"Maybe you'd like a paper with the stock market quotations, Uncle? From about thirty years from now, say?"

The smirk was completely gone now. "You get something like that, Ted, I'll pay you! Wouldn't help you out any, because you have nothing to invest. Me now, I could buy something that will keep me in my old age. I'd give you a — hundred bucks for something like that."

I laughed at him. A hundred dollars! Uncle always had his nerve. He was scowling when I left, still trying to figure how he could get in on the gravy, because outside of Marilyn he was the only person who ever thought I might succeed.

MARILYN cooked dinner for us while I was putting the final touches on the time machine.

"Tonight we celebrate," she said. "Steak."

It smelled wonderful, but the occasional whiff of ozone from my equipment was more exciting. I'd told Marilyn we had about an hour before I could make the test, but with my working faster than I had expected and her getting be-

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hind with the meal, she was just putting the steaks on the table when I was done with the machine.

"Oh, but let's eat first, Ted!" she said.

"I couldn't eat! After so much work—" I stared in fascination at the master switch — the door. "This is it, Marilyn! What I've been working toward all these years!"

She saw the way I felt and maybe she was a little excited herself.

"Go ahead, Ted," she told me.

I closed the door.

There was more ozone and a blurring in the middle of the room. We stepped away from the thickest of the blurring, where something seemed to be gathering substance.

The something, we soon saw, was a man sitting in a chair surrounded by strange apparatus, most of which I couldn't guess the purpose of. It was a very young man, when I could see him better, probably nineteen, wearing bright clothes in what I figured must be the style of 1989.

"Man-o!" he said. "This time machine is low Fahrenheit, o-daddy! Right to the bottom! It's the deepest!"

I blinked. "Parlez vous Francais?"

Marilyn said, "I think he means he likes it. But who is he and just where did he come from?"

The gaily dressed youth got out of the chair and smiled at us. Each of his shoulders had padding the size of a football. His coat tapered from four feet wide at the shoulders to a tightly bound waist, the lapels from a foot at the top to zero. The trousers widened out to wide stiff hoops that ended six inches above his shoes. And the shoes! But at least they weren't really alive, as I had thought at first.

"How is it," asked Marilyn, "that a cool cat from the future comes to visit us in a time machine? I would expect a more scholarly type."

"Not so, doll-o. The angleheads don't reach the real science. The scientist pros believe that all knowledge is known. They delve not into the sub-zero regions of thought. That is done by us amateurs."

HE did a short bit of syncopated tap and introduced himself. "I am Solid Chuck Richards, ambassador to the past, courtesy of the Friday Night Bull Session and Experimentation Society."

"Are they all like you?" I asked.

"No, o-daddy-man. Some are deep, some are high on the scale, but all of them reach together on one thing — they all feel that the pro-scientists have grown angular

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and lost the sense of wonder. So we gather together on Friday nights to work on the off-beat side of science. We read your books — if you are Ted Langer—?"

I admitted it.

He danced a rhythmic circle around me, staring in what was evidently adoration, and kept murmuring, "Reach that deep man! Ted Langer — the father of time travel! O-man-o! Deep! Real deep!"

"Now see here," I finally broke in. "Don't they talk English where you come from? And just how do you come to be here anyway? I built a time machine to travel into the future, and instead I get you telling me how deep I am. Are you here or am I there?"

"You are here, o-daddy-boy, and I also am here. But, to explain this, I may have to use some angle talk, which is what you mean by English. We read your books — which are collectors' items, by the way — and we decided you were way under the zero mark, especially when we saw that the angle-heads wouldn't touch any of your ideas. So we got together and made our time machine. But I am sad to report, doctor-o, that your theory was a bit less than two-hundred-per-cent correct. There were a few errors, which we found."

It was something of a shock to hear this future rock-and-roller tell me there were mistakes in my work, and I started to argue with him about it. But his attention wasn't on the conversation. He was sniffing thoughtfully, the thing he'd called sense of wonder shining in his eyes. He was looking at the steaks Marilyn had set on the table.

"Reach that!" he said, awed. "Gen-you-wine solid flesh! Man-o! I haven't seen a steak like that in all my off-beat life!"

So naturally we invited him to sit down at the table and he didn't have to be asked more than once. It seemed that food was pretty expensive in 1991, which is the year he came from, and what there was of it mostly came from factories where they shoveled soy beans and yeast into a machine and it came out meat at the other end, if you didn't make too much fuss about what you called meat. But with so much of the good farm land ruined by atomic dust, and so much more turned into building lots on account of the growing population, it was the best they could do.

WHEN we heard this, we pushed the second steak in front of him and he showed he was a growing boy by finishing every scrap, along with a double order of French frieds and half a dozen ears of corn on the cob. But he had to give up after two pieces of pie.

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He sat back in the chair, patted his stomach and looked as if he had just won the Irish sweepstakes. He looked at the big refrigerator. When Marilyn opened it to put things away, his eyes almost popped out at the sight of the meat stored there.

"Man-o!" he said. "You must be rich!"

Marilyn laughed. "No, not rich —far from it. We operate a restaurant and that's our stock you see."

"Oh, doll-o! I should not have eaten so much. What do you charge for a meal like that?"

"We would get three and a half for each order," I said, diplomatically not mentioning all his side orders, "although we don't get much carriage trade here. But don't let it worry you. Nothing's too good for a guest from the future."

"Three and a half?" He looked amazed. "Why, such a feed would bring twenty-five or thirty where I come from — if you could find it! Let me pay, o-daddy-friend, at least your price."

And he pulled out some bills. I started to push them back, for of course I wasn't going to spoil this great moment in my life by asking a traveler from the future to pay for a meal.

But then I saw what he was trying to give me.

I picked up the bills and stared. Marilyn's head was over my shoulder and she was staring just as hard. She took one out of my hand.

"It's not real," she said. "There's not that much money in the world."

She had the five. I had the ones. The five-thousand and the one-thousand-dollar bills, that is. I looked up at Solid Chuck Richards.

"When you said that meal would cost twenty-five or thirty, did you mean twenty-five or thirty *thousand?*"

"You reach me, man. Inflation, you know. It's terrible. I remember when a gee would keep the beat rocking in a juke palace for an hour. Now you pay half a gee a number. It's terrible."

AFTER we explained to him that the inflation was even worse than that, he decided it was something more than terrible. It seems he hadn't paid much attention to money in his younger days, though he did recall now that when he was very small he'd been able to get a good nickel candy bar for twenty dollars, but he hadn't seen anything smaller than a hundred in some time now.

"There should be a law against this sort of thing," he said indignantly. "It's enough to turn a man into an anglehead, the way they keep pushing up the price of fumes. And what they charge for Bulgy Sanders records —"

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He picked up the bills and looked at them.

"But I think maybe we can find a way to profit on this, daddy-boy! I have a deep thought—we members of the Friday Night Bull Session and Experimentation Society will come to your restaurant and pay you five gees for a steak dinner, which is a fine price for you but very little for us. In that way, we will eat good food and you will gather a good bundle of the stuff of life."

There was a thudding noise at the window. I looked over quick. Somebody was hanging on outside, off balance, as if he had been standing on a ladder outside and had fallen against the window.

I ran for the door, forgetting it was a switch. But Solid Chuck Richards realized it. He dived back into his chair and called, "Reach you later, o-daddy!" He disappeared as I pulled the door open.

The sudden flash as the time machine stopped operating reminded me about those switches on the door, but it was too late now. I ran out and around the side just in time to see a figure disappearing up the alley. Sure enough, there was a ladder against the window.

I didn't bother chasing the man very far, because, after a fast look at him, I had a pretty good idea who it was. I'd speak to him later.

MARILYN and I sat around looking at the big bills. They were the size of present-day currency, and were beautifully made, and would have passed easily except for a few things. Such as that "Series 1988" inscribed alongside the signature of Irving P. Walcourt, Secretary of the Treasury. And the Treasurer of the United States in 1988 would be Kuru Hamonoto. From the State of Hawaii, I wondered, or—?

"They're no use to us at all," said Marilyn. "Unless we hold them until 1988. I was talking about security for our old age. Do you suppose—?"

"You forget," I said, "that steak will run you twenty-five or thirty thousand in 1988. This is going to be a great disappointment to the members of the Friday Night Bull Session and Experimentation Society, but I fear we must explain to Solid Chuck Richards that we just cannot afford to do much business of this type."

I pushed aside the money and began thinking about some of the things the youth from 1991 had told me. There were holes in my theories—a lot of holes. True, I had succeeded in building a time machine, but I could never go anyplace in it. Because time travel was possible only by traveling from one time machine to another. The amateurs of 1991, knowing from my books (I must remember to

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write them) that I had built a time machine in 1959, were able to make contact. Solid Chuck Richards was selected by lot from several volunteers to try the machine. I met the other members of the Society later and learned that and a number of other things from them.

The reason Solid Chuck came back instead of my going forward made solid sense. I could see it now. My time machine had never existed in 1991. His had existed in 1959, or at least its parts had. I could overcome that problem — if I had the full power of the Sun for several minutes to work with, and a way to handle it. Then I could change things so that my time machine would have existed in the future . . .

Even the verb tenses were going wrong on me.

These amateur experimenters, it seemed, were considered a bit on the crackpot side, taking such pseudo-science as mine seriously. Not knowing enough science to realize that the ideas I wrote about were impossible, as any professional scientist would have, they followed them through. They tried to get in touch with me in their time, but I wasn't available, which saved me another paradox. Suppose I had joined the Society and come back as a volunteer?

But it was encouraging to know the reason I was going to be unavailable in 1991. Marilyn and I had gone on a second honeymoon — on the first commercial passenger liner to Mars.

"And so," I told her, "you don't have to worry about security in your old age. Tickets to Mars must cost a few trillion dollars. We won't be poor."

Marilyn was still looking at the currency of the future.

"We will be," she said, "if we keep selling steak for the price of soy-bean hamburger. By the way, Ted, I wonder who that was at the window?"

The answer came to me then. I put the bills into my pocket and kissed her.

"We will not have to eat soy-bean hamburger, o-doll. And I will take you to Mars for your second honeymoon — as soon as they start passenger service. I am going out to make a down payment on the tickets right now."

UNCLE Johnson took the glass from his eye. He looked very tense, like a fisherman with a prize catch on a very thin line.

"It's good," he said, and his voice trembled a little. "I—suppose your time machine worked?"

"Surprised, are you, Uncle?"

"Yes, yes. But I see your situation, Ted. You, of course, can't afford to hold these for thirty years. Now — ah — I can. And I'll be glad to help you out by taking

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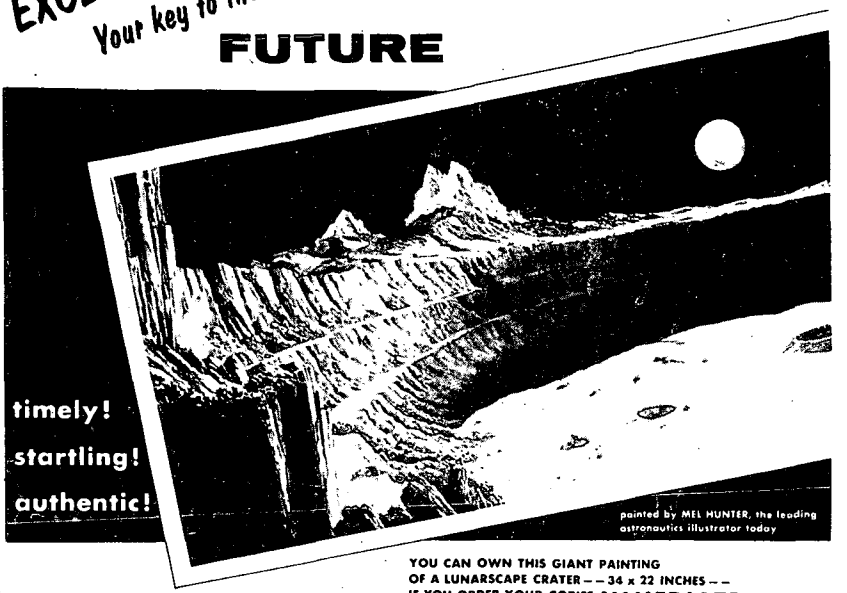

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them off your hands. Naturally I have to hold them a long time, so — let's say twenty dollars a thousand?"

"Let's not say that." I took the bill from his hand. "I figure fifty is a fair price. There'll be lots more, Uncle. And, as you say, I am always broke and cannot afford to put them away for my old age. But running the time machine is expensive and I can't afford to take less than fifty."

He looked as if he were going to snatch the bill right out of my hand, he was so eager.

"All right, Ted, I realize there are expenses. Thirty-five."

We compromised on forty.

"But I want a promise," he said emphatically. "I'm to be the only one you sell these bills to!"

"You reach me, o-uncle." I handed him the bills. "You're deep, man. Real deep!"

Real deep in the hole, that is— he mortgaged his house and his regular inventory to buy up all the money I began taking in. Once we redeemed the wedding ring and all the other articles, I got to feeling mellow and even a bit grateful. He'd started me in business, so to speak. I couldn't stick him with all those millions that would just about buy him a helicab ride to the poorhouse in 1988.

So when Marilyn and I got just as deep in the black, because the Society members gave us some books on stock-market statistics, I started giving Uncle tips every now and then. Not free, of course — I asked for half and we settled on seventy-thirty. With that plus the ones I bought, both for now and the long pull, I guess we're the only people living today who can be sure of having a second honeymoon on Mars, although Solid Chuck Richards tells me he hears Mars is overrated, there not being a juke on the whole planet, and even if there were you couldn't jump to any decent kind of beat in that low gravity.

I wouldn't say so to Solid Chuck Richards, but that sounds like absolute zero to me.

— JOSEPH FARRELL

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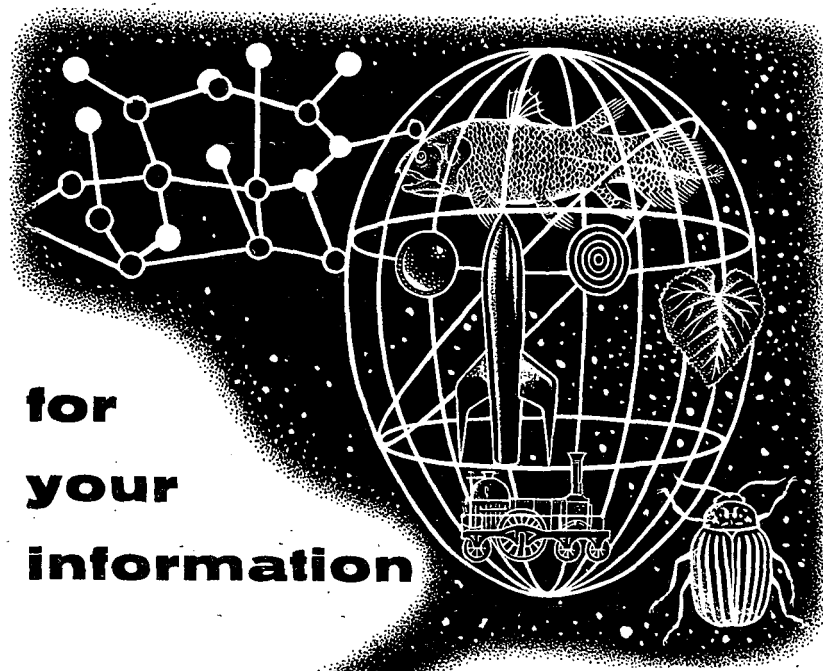

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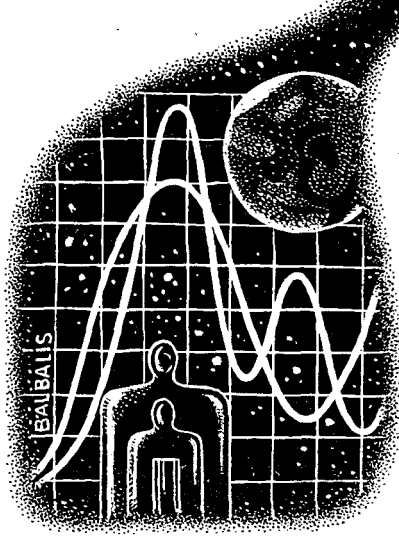

BY WILLY LEY

THE ATLANTIC MISSILE RANGE

IN the fall of 1944, a commission of U. S. Army officers, from the Office of the Chief of Ordnance and from the Chief of Engineers, received orders to look for an area which was suitable for the test firing of large missiles.

The reason why this happened in the fall of 1944 is simple. During the middle of June of that year, the German V-1 buzz bombs had been streaking across the

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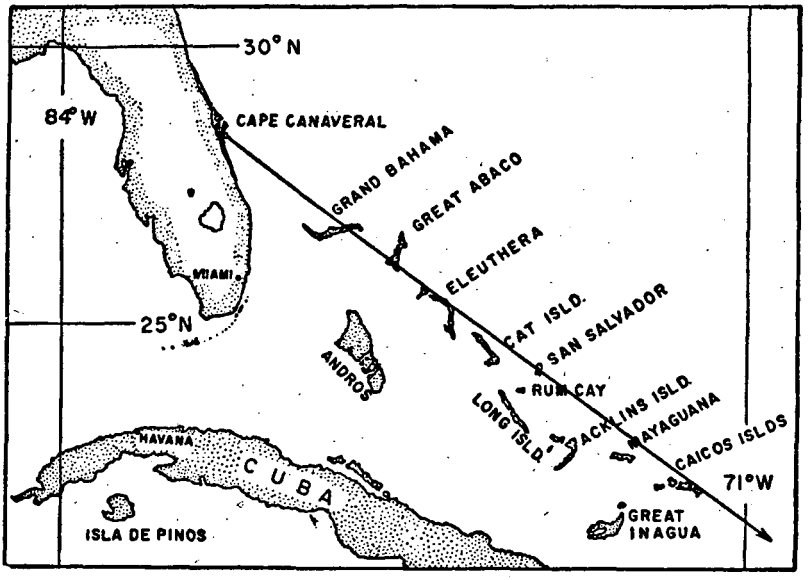

Fig. 1: Sketch map of Atlantic Missile Range. Firing range goes all the way to Ascension Island, 5,000 miles from Florida

Channel from France to England. Early in September, the first V-2 rockets followed. The missile age was on. The United States needed a missile proving ground, but no longer for a war that happened to be still going on.

The commission studied maps, read annual weather summaries and then made a few trips. As the outcome of their studies and inspection trips, they recommended an area north of El Paso, Texas.

The Secretary of Defense approved the choice on February 20, 1945—the war in Europe had only some weeks yet to run — and the area became established and later famous as the White Sands Proving Ground. It begins at the Texas-New Mexico state line to the north of El Paso and runs due north from there for 125 miles. Its greatest width, from Alamagordo on to the north, is 41 miles. "An immense area for the ballistics of the future has been staked out," said the editor of a New Mexico newspaper as soon as the facts could be released.

FIRST rocket to be fired from the new proving ground was a WAC-Corporal, on September

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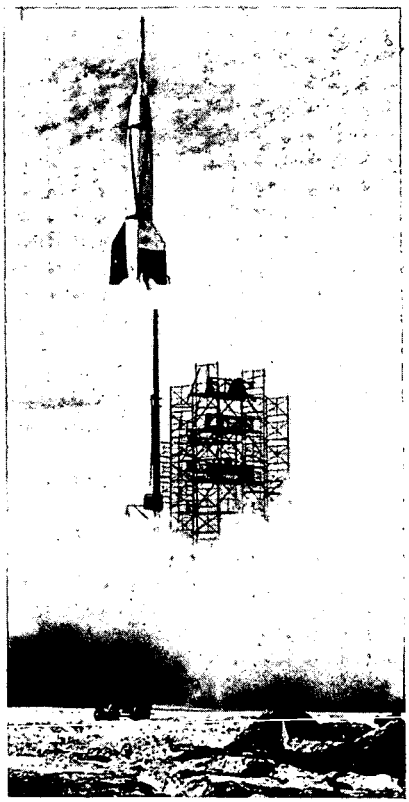

Fig. 2: First rocket fired from Cape Canaveral, Bumper No. 8, on July 24, 1950

26 of the same year. It went to a height of 43 miles in a vertical shot.

Anybody who knew something about ballistics could calculate in his head that that meant a maximum range of about 85 miles — if the WAC-Corporal had been a missile and not a research rocket, that is.

On April 16, 1946, the first V-2 rocket was fired. It misbehaved and its flight had to be terminated by radio command. The next V-2 was ready on May 10 and rose, as programmed, to about 70 miles, hitting the desert 31 miles to the north of the firing site.

Counting from the date of the Secretary's approval, the White Sands Proving Ground was one year, two months and three weeks old. And it was too small!

The Germans had fired their V-2s for range, reaching between 190 and 200 miles; the lower value being the operational average, the upper value the operational record. At White Sands, you could fire V-2 rockets for altitude, but not for range. It took a few months until the facts of life were courageously faced, but in October 1946, another committee was established. It was to look for a *long*-range proving ground.

I don't know whether some of the members of the new commission had also been members of the first commission, but the new commission surely could read the report made by the first and retrace its reasoning. The reasoning then had been that the missile should be recovered for inspection and study after impact. Logically, then, the impact area had to be a desert. Inhabited land was out and a swamp would not do. And naturally the impact area had to

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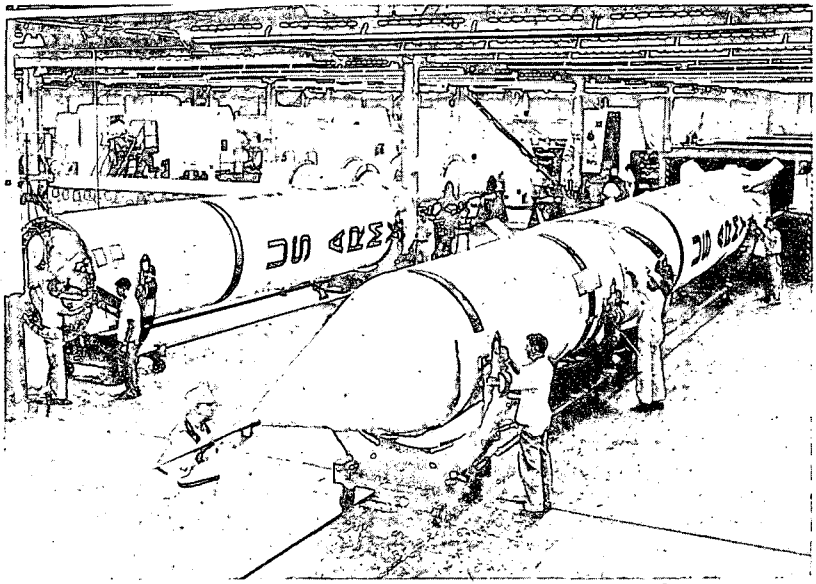

Fig. 3: Redstone rockets ready for shipment to Cape Canaveral

be in the continental United States, not some other country.

Fortunately, we don't have deserts much larger than the one that was picked. For longer ranges than 200 miles — and those German engineers cheerfully wrote equations proving a range of at least 600 miles with a single stage and any range at all with three stages — only the ocean would do. Now, of course, we do have two long shorelines and the firing site could be just about wherever it was convenient. Impact would have to be in the ocean in a sector where ships did not normally sail. These two points were easy.

But what about in between? In between, there should be a place, or places, where somebody had the necessary instruments to track the flight of the missiles. The Pacific coastline has hardly any nearby islands. In the northern portion of the Atlantic shore, you could, on a map, draw a flight path which first skirted Long Island for its whole length and continued over Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. But these are waters which are not only well traveled but virtually congested.

A place in the southern portion of the Atlantic shore remained the only choice. There was an island

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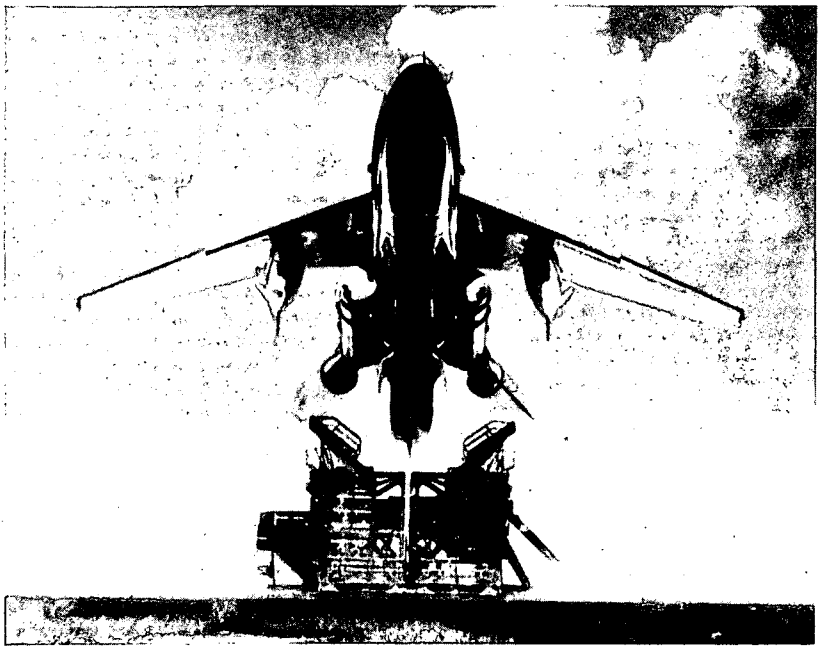

Fig. 4: Snark intercontinental cruising missile taking off from extreme corner of Cape

chain that could be used, the Bahamas. Beyond that island chain there was Puerto Rico. The Bahamas are British, but maybe we could come to terms with the British government. Now, supposing the Bahamas could be used for tracking stations, what should one pick for the launching area?

THE commission looked at a map of Florida. There was one place that jutted out into the ocean; on the map, it measured a little over 16 miles from the mainland. The geographical situation is this: Between the mainland and the land farther to the east, you first have the Indian River. Then comes Merritt Island. Then the Banana River, and then the next strip of land which terminates to the east in a sandy cape: Cape Canaveral.

The Cape is sandy. So is Merritt Island and so is the mainland. Where the land is not cultivated, you have mostly scrubby undergrowth, interspersed with palmettos; as soon as you cross the Indian River, these begin to look undernourished. In short, the Cape does

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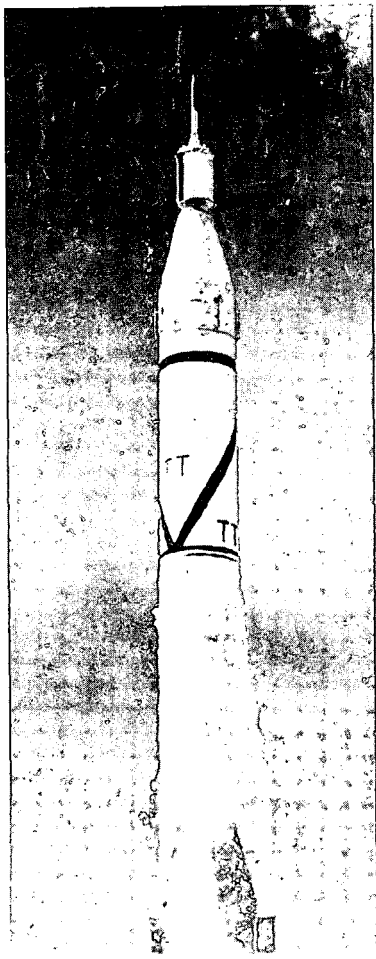

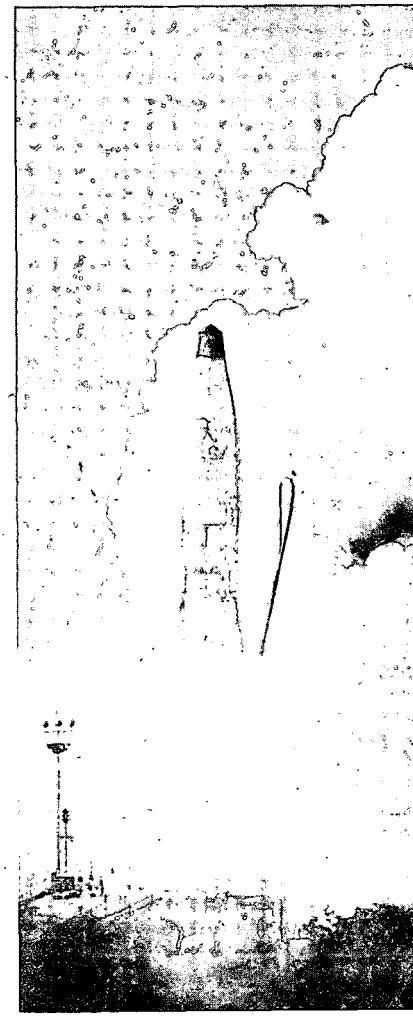

Fig. 5: (Left) Jupiter-C, carrying Explorer satellite in its nose, taking off

Fig. 6: (Above) Atlas missile taking off, Pad 13, Atlantic Missile Range

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not look "tropical." The temperature is tropical, however — at least in August, where it is rarely less than 95 degrees during the day with the humidity being about the same figure.

It is typical of people that, when asked about animal life in their area, they mention the unpleasant types first. The answer I got was: "Well, we have coral snakes, and cottonmouth and plenty of rattlesnakes. And, of course, alligators." I am sure that other things must live there too, but they were not mentioned in conversation.

As for signs of civilized activity, Cape Canaveral had, for years, a lighthouse. The lighthouse is still there among the missile pads, but for a long time it was all by itself. At some time, the Navy had picked out a few square miles of land and designated it the Banana River Naval Air Station.

On June 20, 1947, the commission recommended Cape Canaveral as the most logical available long-range missile-launching site and suggested the Naval Air Station as the headquarters area. This recommendation was approved three weeks later, and with that the wheels could be set in motion. Quite a large number of wheels were involved. First the area had to be transferred from the Navy to the Air Force. I'm not sure that this was a simple step, but it certainly was the simplest of all the steps that had to be taken.

The next was to start negotiations with Great Britain about the establishment of tracking stations on the Bahamas. These negotiations were actually concluded in February, 1949, but at that moment they were still useless. First Congress had to pass legislation which made the long-range missile-proving ground possible at all. Congress, naturally, would not pass any legislation involving a foreign power if it was not certain that said foreign power would play along.

Then things happened with reasonable speed. Congress passed the necessary legislation which President Truman signed on May 11, 1949. On October 1st of the same year, the proving ground was activated. The signing of the agreement with Great Britain was, for reasons unknown to me, delayed until July 21, 1950.

IT was high time that those signatures were put on paper — Cape Canaveral fired its first rocket only three days later! It was a Bumper rocket, consisting of a V-2 as first stage and a WAC-Corporal as the second stage. Three days later, another Bumper was fired.

Well, Cape Canaveral may have been in legal existence and also activated as a military establishment, but one could not say that it was "ready." Robert P. Havi-

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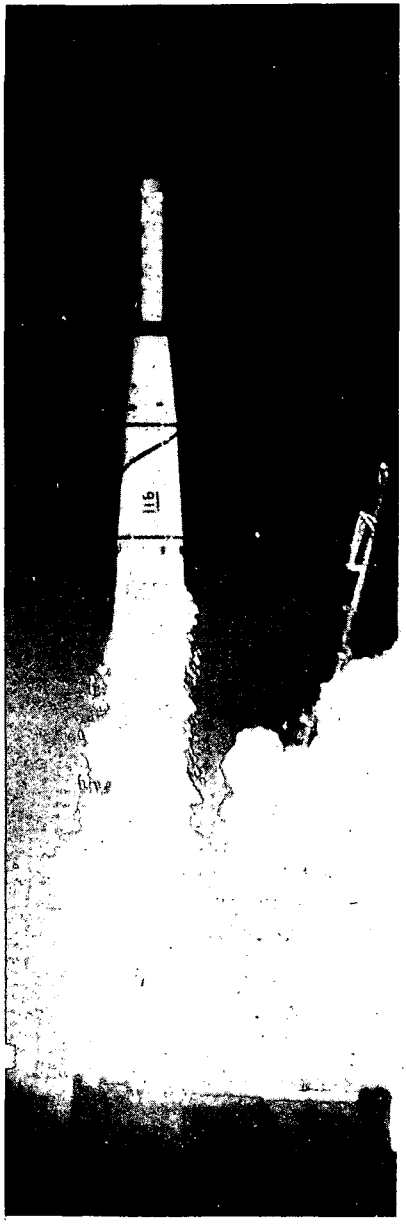

land, who was in charge of these two Bumper shots, reminisced later that at White Sands there had been ten feet of concrete between him and the missile; at the Cape, it was a pine board one inch thick! He lacked confidence in the strength of a pine wall. Luckily, that strength did not have to stand a test.

All this has changed since then.

I remember the blockhouse near one of the Atlas launching pads. Its shape is best described as that of the carapace of a marine turtle. I don't know its size in feet, yards or meters. But it is large. As for position, imagine that the giant marine turtle points to the launching pad with its tail. Where the hole for the neck would be in the carapace is where you enter. There is a steel door that looks like the door to a bank vault. Everybody, no matter what secrecy may prevail in other matters, will assure you that the people in the blockhouse might be trapped for a while if a missile fell on top of it, but that they would be safe.

The arrangement of the various launching pads follows a simple plan. The extreme corner of the Cape is reserved for the Snark and the Bomarc. As you look north (more or less) from that corner, you have four launching pads for the Atlas. Beyond that are the

Fig. 7: Thor-Able rocket taking off from Pad 17B

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launching pads for the Titan. Beyond that there is room for things still to come.

Look the other way (more or less southwest) and you first have the area for the Navaho. Then comes the launching pad for the Vanguard, then three pads for the Thor (one of them for lunar probes), then the Army's launching pads for Jupiter, Redstone and satellite-throwing Jupiter-C rockets, and finally the "ship's motion simulator" for the Polaris rocket. Then comes a canal for a harbor which is called the turn-around basin.

Farther inland are three buildings I recall for personal reasons.

Let me mention the cafeteria first, because my personal reason is so simple: it is beautifully air-conditioned, which, after riding around in 95-degree heat, is a major point. The second building I remember especially is Central Control, about which more later. And the third is officially called Telemetry 3. It is fairly in the center of the whole complex. I haven't been inside, but for three nights in a span of five days I was on top of it, seeing (in that order) a Jupiter-C rocket, carrying Explorer V, a Jupiter missile and a three-engine Atlas fired.

TO the south of the Cape area, you have twelve miles of civilian territory. It is full of motels, called Sea Missile Motel, Vanguard Motel, Satellite Motel and Starlite Motel, all efficiently air-conditioned, all temporarily filled with service brass and missile men and all also inhabited by tourists who stare at the generals and the missile men.

For reasons which are probably historical, the Starlite is considered the center. Convair Astronautics has its office there. There is also a press room with Western Union in evidence — if only during daylight hours. (What do you do when they fire at night? But let's not go into the problems of the press.)

I derived a small amount of private amusement from the fact that the manager of the Starlite bears the name of Landwirth. This German word has two meanings; the one that flashed into my mind is its meaning of "Country Inn Keeper." Country? Well, yes, you can say so, since it isn't a city. But inn? With neon signs, hot and cold water, long lines of Cadillacs and air-conditioning?

Just to finish up the geography: to the south of the civilian area is Patrick Air Force Base. There doesn't seem to be much secret there. Airplane hangars, an Air Force Weather Station and office buildings. And — oh, yes, an officers' club with a room named T.G.I.F., which stands for Thank God It's Friday. Unimaginative

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outsiders might think it is just a bar.

Having made clear, I hope, that Patrick Air Force Base and Cape Canaveral are not the same thing (everybody seems to make that mistake; I myself did before I got there), it remains to give Cape Canaveral's official name. For years it was known as A.F.M.T.C. or Air Force Missile Test Center. But it is not all Air Force as far as the missile pads are concerned. The Navy is there and so is the Army. More recently the N.A.C.A. (National Advisory Committee of Aeronautics) has moved in with a number of high-altitude research rockets, and when the new National Space Agency gets going, they'll no doubt send a representative to see General Yates, asking for a corner of the Cape to put up their things.

So the new official name is Atlantic Missile Range.

Now we come to what is called "down range," those island stations which are the real reason why Cape Canaveral became the Atlantic Missile Range.

The first of the down-range stations is still in Florida, near Palm Beach. Its name is Jupiter Inlet. The first island tracking station is on Grand Bahama Island, 152 miles away. The next one is on Eleuthera, 290 miles from the Cape. Then comes the one on San Salvador, 414 miles away. The next one, Mayaguana, is 544 miles away. Station No. 7 (Patrick is counted as Station No. 1) is on Grand Turk Island, 660 miles away. Station No. 8 is on a bigger island, in the territory of the Dominican Republic. And Station No. 9 is on the west coast of Puerto Rico. It is named Mayaguez Air Force Base, after a city on Puerto Rico which is about 30 miles from the tracking station.

AT first, this thousand-mile range from Florida to Puerto Rico was thought to be long enough. Then "down range" had to be extended to the tiny island of Santa Lucia, all of 27 miles long and 14 miles wide. This made "down range" 1400 miles long. The next logical checkpoint would have been the extreme eastern tip of South America. But it was not necessary to go to the mainland; there was another small island available which one Count de Noronha had discovered in 1503. Logically, the island is named Fernando de Noronha.

This one is really small, like the tropical isles of the story books. It is 5½ miles long by ¾ of a mile wide. The Brazilian government maintains a military base there, manned by 150 soldiers. The non-military population is about 650. It is an ichthyophagous — all right: "fish-eating" — community and probably not by

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choice. The distance from the Cape to Fernando de Noronha is 3,585 miles and the island is some distance to one side of the missile flight path. This does not harm the tracking; after all, these missiles do not skim the surface of the ocean. (Having written this, I feel a premonition that some day somebody will build one that does.)

The current last link in the chain, or Station No. 12, is Ascension Island in the middle of the South Atlantic, about four times as large as Fernando de Noronha in area. It is 4400 miles from the Cape. Beyond it is mostly open sea, but the simple facts of physics are that if you shoot a rocket much faster than you need for this range, it will go into orbit.

Now there is a 2000-mile gap between Puerto Rico and Fernando de Noronha, and another 800-mile gap between the latter and Ascension. To fill these gaps, there are sea-going tracking stations, trim ships full of instrumentation. They are of two types and their total number was thirteen in September 1958.

It seems hard for the outsider to grasp that all this, the area of the Cape with its buildings and equipment worth $400,000,000, its 19,000 people and all the down-range stations over thousands of miles, should just be considered a laboratory. As a matter of fact, the term should be even more curtailed; it is just a testing laboratory. They don't "invent" missiles at the Cape. They don't even build missiles. All they do is test them. Testing means to find out (A) whether something goes wrong and (B) what did go wrong if something did. Since testing means finding out, you have the paradox that what looks like a spectacular failure can be rather successful as a test.

THE favorite example told around the Cape is the failure of the first Atlas. The rocket started gyrating, tumbling and in general misbehaving. Finally it had to be deliberately destroyed in midair. But when all the test results were in, it was discovered that these amounted to about 95 per cent of what the engineers had wanted to find out. The press labeled it a failure, plain and simple, and one newspaper even wrote an editorial that the whole program ought to be scrapped since the missile was so obviously unworkable. Now if that rocket had made a flight which the spectators had thought perfect, it would have been only five per cent better than the "failure" that actually happened.

That does not apply to every shot that goes wrong. Testing is one thing, but if you shoot for a mission, the story is different. A lunar probe that does not go to

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the Moon, a Jupiter-C that does not throw its top stage into an orbit, these are near-failures. I use this term because something is learned even in such a case. But if a rocket is fired just for testing, there cannot be a failure.

Now what happens to a missile when it gets to the Cape?

It arrives from the manufacturer often by air lift, some, such as the Atlas, by trailer truck. The first job is what is called a hangar check. Was anything damaged in transit? Do all the electrical connections work? Did sand or dust get into the missile? After the hangar check is completed, the missile goes to its launching pad. In its Gantry crane, the checking begins all over. This time other things are added. More instrumentation, for instance. In general, all the missiles are weighed down with instrumentation which nobody in his right mind would put into the finished product. They are testing, remember, not firing rockets for amusement.

A test fueling is part of the testing procedure on the pad, during a dress rehearsal count-down. Such a count-down will be interrupted for all kinds of reasons. The strangest such "hold" on record occurred when the contractor's testing crew suddenly discovered an alligator in their block house. One of the officers tried to console them by saying that the alligator's presence was not authorized, but the engineers were in no mood for legal points — they rarely are — and called a hold until somebody removed the visitor.

In time, everybody is satisfied that things should go well. The event itself is called a "shoot" — except by the people who do it. They prefer the term "launch," which inevitably gave rise to the telephone reply: "No, you can't talk to Dr. Soandso now; he's out to launch."

The time for the launch is set, let's say, at 2300, or 11 P.M. EST. Incidentally, it depends on the test phase a missile is in whether the launch is during the day or during the night. When the missile is new, visual observation is obviously important, hence firing takes place in daylight. Later on, when all the information still to be gathered has to come from the instruments, the firing might just as well be scheduled after sunset, when it is cooler.

SINCE this is testing, one has to count on something going wrong, in which case the missile must not be permitted to fall where it could do harm. To insure safety for outsiders, lines must be established on a map. In the center is the line which indicates the desired flight path. At some distance to the right and left of this line, two lines are drawn which

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are called the impact lines. If the missile has to fall, it must fall inside these impact lines. But how?

Let us assume that missile runs off course in the direltion of one of the impact lines. Then it has to be destroyed and its pieces must still fall inside the impact lines. Naturally there is a point which marks the last possible moment for destruction. All these points form the two "destruct" lines inside the impact lines. If a missile crosses a "destruct" line, it *must* be destroyed.

The width of the band between the destruct lines and the bands between destruct and impact lines vary for every type of missile; of course, no actual figures are handed out. The Range Safety Officer in the Central Control building cannot see anything directly, just like the people in the blockhouse. They don't look through windows — they look at TV screens. And the Range Safety Officer has another device to aid him, the impact computer.

The impact computer gets its information from the radars and from instruments in the rocket and goes through a continuous process of calculation. The results of its labor appear on a map with two pointers. One pointer shows where the missile is at this instant. The other pointer shows where it would hit the water if its propulsion failed at that instant.

The Range Safety Officer's means of interfering consist of two toggle switches. One is labeled "fuel cut-off," and when thrown, the result is what the label says. The other switch is labeled "destruct" and it also does what the label says. They must be used in succession — the "destruct" switch will do absolutely nothing if the cut-off switch has not been used.

So time has been set for 2300. At T-150 (minutes), all downrange stations are ready. All radars are in fine tune and no tracking camera is jammed. The devout hope is that they'll stay that way and at T — 150 two airplanes take off. One is radar-equipped and sees to it that there are no ships between the impact lines. The other monitors all the radio frequencies to be used to see that there is no interference.

The damnedest things can happen. Once a radio-equipped laundry delivery van in a town many hundreds of miles away caused interference!

Another safety measure is to divert all scheduled airliners. If no shoot is planned, the New York to Miami non-stop flight goes straight through the missile track, though probably at a different altitude.

AT T-150, there is still not an ounce of fuel in the missile, unless it is a solid-fuel job.

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Fueling comes last, after the probability that anything else may go wrong has dwindled to virtually nothing. Visitors usually assemble at T-90 in the office building at Patrick Air Force Base and are brought to the Cape by Air Force bus. The bus stops at Telemetry No. 3. (Usually a coffee and sandwich wagon arrives at the same time.) When the visitors emerge from their bus, a message waits for them. It says "T-50 and counting." Fifty minutes to go and no problems.

By the time everybody is on top of the building, where there are a dozen phone booths for the use of the press, and by the time the newsmen have set up their cameras, a loudspeaker has been connected. "T minus 25 and counting," it will say suddenly. On the evening I have in mind, the sky was clear, with all the stars out. Fairly high up, there was a nearly full Moon, and lower in the sky a red star was conspicuous: Mars. Things looked as if they had been arranged by Chesley Bonestell.

Near the missile being made ready, a bright red light kept flashing. It is the customary signal that a missile is being readied. Expressed in words, it just means "Stay Away." As the loudspeaker said "T minus 20," a battery of floodlights was switched on. The big rocket — it was an Atlas — was clearly visible.

"T minus 15."

To anybody who did not know what was going on and who looked at the rocket through binoculars, it must have seemed as if something had gone badly wrong. The rocket just spouted white vapor, top and bottom. The white vapor — actually atmospheric moisture condensing because of the cold oxygen gas that came from the tank vents — looked luminous and quite dense under the floodlight. And the flashing red warning light made it appear as if a flame were developing any moment.

"T minus 8."

"She's still loxing," said somebody who had just looked through the viewfinder of a powerful telephoto camera. That strange term is derived from the unpretty abbreviation for liquid oxygen: lox.

"T minus 2."

The white vapor thinned. The valves must have been closed, or at least some of them.

"T minus 45 seconds."

Close now, last and probably unnecessary camera adjustments.

"T minus 15," and then, apparently without pause, "7 . . . 6 . . . 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . ."

At "T minus 3," the two small vernier rocket engines began spouting their thin flames. Immediately afterward, the whole launching pad lit up as if from an explosion. All three major engines spouted fire. The rocket lifted.

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After two seconds or so, it had lifted itself out of the area illuminated by the floodlights. The rocket became invisible; only the bright flames from the exhaust nozzles were there against the dark sky.

All this was apparently without the faintest whisper of a sound. But at about the instant the rocket itself became nearly invisible, the sound had traveled the distance from launching pad to Telemetry No. 3. The thunder hit us and the roar seemed to get even stronger as the triple flame lifted upward.

I THOUGHT somewhat automatically that the exhaust flames looked "good" and that the roar was "normal," but these were side thoughts. I followed the flames as they lifted up. Higher, going faster, up, up.

The rocket now seemed to be overhead and the flames were foreshortened. They changed into a most brilliant star which dwindled in size but did not seem to lessen in brilliance.

Meanwhile, the loudspeaker continued counting, the so-called plus count, sounding unemotional and impersonal.

"Plus 150."

At that instant, the star got much smaller. The two boosters had used up their fuel and only the main rocket motor kept going. I kept it in my glasses. The star was quite small now but still brilliant.

At "Plus 250," it suddenly disappeared. Brennschluss — burnout.

The missile was on its way. And we went on ours.

— WILLY LEY

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

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THE BITTEREST PILL

Honestly, I was content to be the richest man in Levittown . . . if not for McGhee, I'd have happily left something for all the rest of you!

By FREDERIK POHL

MARGERY tried putting the phone back on the hook, but it immediately rang again. She kicked the stand, picked up the phone and said: "Hang up, will you? We don't want any!" She slammed the phone down to break the connection and took it off the hook again.

The doorbell rang.

"My turn," I said and put down the paper—it looked as though I never would find out what the National League standings were.

It was Patrolman Gamelsfelder.

"Man to see you, Mr. Binns. Says it's important." He was sweating—you could see the black patches on his blue shirt. I knew what he was thinking: We had air conditioning and money, and he was risking his life day after day for a lousy policeman's pay, and what kind of a country was this anyhow? He'd said as much that afternoon.

Illustrated by JOHNSON

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"It might be important to him, but I don't want to see anybody. Sorry, officer." I closed the door.

Margery said: "Are you or are you not going to help me change the baby?"

I said cheerfully: "I'll be glad to, dear." And it was true—besides being good policy to say that, because she was pretty close to exploding. It was true because I wanted something to do myself. I wanted some nice simple demanding task, like holding a one-year-old down with my knee in the middle of his chest, while one hand held his feet and the other one pinned the diaper. I mean it was nice of Uncle Otto to leave me the money, but did they have to put it in the paper?

THE doorbell rang again as I was finishing. Margery was upstairs with Gwennie, who took a lot of calming down because she always does, so I stood the baby on his fat little feet and answered the door myself.

It was the policeman again. "Some telegrams for you, Mr. Binns. I wooden let the boy deliver them."

"Thanks." I tossed them in the drawer of the telephone stand. What was the use of opening them? They were from people who had heard about Uncle Otto and the money, and they wanted to beg, borrow or sell me something.

"That fellow's still here," Patrolman Gamelsfelder said sourly. "I think he's sick."

"Too bad." I tried to close the door.

"Anyway, he says to tell Cuddles that Tinker is here."

I grabbed the door. "Tell Cud—"

"That's what he said." Gamelsfelder saw that that hit me and it pleased him. For the first time, he smiled.

"What—what's his name?"

"Winston McNeely McGhee," said Officer Garnelsfelder happily, "or anyway that's what he told me, Mr. Binns."

"Send the son of a— Send the fellow in," I said, and jumped to get the baby away from the ashtray where Margery had left a cigarette burning.

Winnie McGhee. It was all I needed to finish off my day.

He came in holding his head as though it weighed a thousand pounds. He was never what you'd call healthy-looking, even when Margery stood me up at the altar in order to elope with him. It was his frail, poetic charm, and maybe he still had that and maybe he didn't, but the way he looked to me, he was sick, all right. He looked as if he weighed a fast hundred pounds, not counting the head; and the head looked like a balloon.

He moaned, "Hello, Harlan, age thirty-one, five-eleven, one seventy-

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three. You got an acetysalicylic acid tablet?"

I said: "What?"

But he didn't get a chance to answer right away because there was a flutter and a scurry from the expansion attic and Margery appeared at the head of the stairs.

"I thought—" she began wildly, and then she saw that her wildest thought was true. *"You!"*

She betrayed pure panic—she began fussing with her hair with one hand and smoothing her Bermuda shorts with the other, while she was simultaneously trying to wiggle, no hands, out of the sloppy old kitchen apron that had been good enough for me.

McGHEE said pallidly: "Hello. Please, don't you have an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?"

"I don't know what it is," I told him.

Margery chuckled ruefully. "Ah, Harlan, Harlan," she said with fond tolerance, beaming lovingly at me as she came down the stairs. It was enough to turn the stomach of a cat. "You forget, Winnie—Harlan doesn't know much chemistry. Won't you find him an aspirin, Harlan? That's all he wants."

"Thanks," said Winnie with a grateful sigh, massaging his temples.

I went and got him an aspirin. I thought of adding a little mixer to the glass of water that went with it, but there wasn't anything in the medicine chest that looked right, and besides it's against the law.

I don't mind admitting it, I never liked Winnie McGhee, and it isn't just because he swiped my bride away from me. Sure, she got smart after six months, and then when she turned up with an annulment and sincere repentance —well, I've never regretted marrying her. Or anyway, not much.

But you can't expect me to like McGhee. Hell, if I'd never *seen* the man before, I'd have hated his little purple guts at first sight, because he looked like a poet and talked like a scientist and acted like a jerk.

I started back to the living room and yelled: "The baby!"

Margery turned away from simpering at her former husband and sprang for the puppy's dish. She got it away from the baby, but not quite intact. There was a good baby-sized mouthful of mixed milk and dog-biscuit that she had to excavate for, and naturally the baby had his way of counter-attacking for *that*.

"No bite!" she yelled, pulling her finger out of his mouth and putting it in hers. Then she smiled sweetly. "Isn't he a darling, Winnie? He's got his daddy's nose, of course. But don't you think he has my eyes?"

"He'll have your fingers, too, if

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you don't keep them out of his mouth," I told her.

Winnie said: "That's normal. After all, with twenty-four paired chromosomes to form the gamete, it is perfectly obvious that the probability of inheriting none of his traits from one parent—that is, being exactly like the other—is one chance in 8,388,608. Ooh, my head."

Margery gave him a small frown. "What?"

He was like a wound-up phonograph. "That's without allowance for spontaneous mutation," he added. "*Or* induced. And considering the environmental factors *in utero*—that is, broad-spectrum antibiotics, tripling of the background radiation count due to nuclear weapons, dietary influences, et cetera—yes, I should put the probability of induced mutation rather high. Perhaps of the order of—"

I interrupted. "Here's your aspirin. Now what do you want?"

"Harlan!" Margery said warningly.

"I mean—well, what *do* you want?"

He leaned his head on his hands. "I want you to help me conquer the world," he said.

Crash-splash. "Go get a mop!" Margery ordered; the baby had just spilled the puppy's water. She glared at me, then smiled at Winnie. "Go ahead," she coaxed. "Take your nice aspirin and we'll talk about your trip around the world later."

BUT that hadn't been what he had said. Conquer the world. I heard it plain as day. I went to fetch the mop, because that was as good a way as any to think over what to do about Winston McNeely McGhee. I mean what did I want with the world? Uncle Otto had already *bequeathed* me the world, or anyway more of it than I had ever hoped to own.

When I came back, Winnie was tottering around the room, followed at a respectful distance by my wife, holding the baby. She was saying to the prospective conqueror of all the world: "How did you hear about Harlan's good lu—about the tragic loss of his dear uncle, I mean?"

He groaned: "I read it in the paper." He fiddled aimlessly with the phone.

"It's all for the best, I say," said Margery in a philosophic tone, fishing damp graham-cracker crumbs out of the baby's ear. "Dear Uncle Otto lived a rich and full life. Think of all those years in Yemen! And the enormous satisfaction it must have given him to be personally responsible for the installation of the largest petroleum-cracking still west of the Suez!"

"*East*, my dear. East. The Mutawakelite Kingdom lies just south of Saudi Arabia."

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She looked at him thoughtfully, but all she said was: "Winnie, you've changed."

And so he had; but, for that matter, so had she. It was not like Margery to be a hypocrite.

Simpering over her ex-husband I could understand—it wasn't so bad; she was merely showing the poor guy how very much better off she was than she ever would have been with him.

But the tragic loss of my dear uncle had never occasioned a moment's regret in her—*or* in me; because the plain fact of the matter is that until the man from the Associated Press called up, she didn't even know I had an Uncle Otto. And I had pretty nearly forgotten it myself. Otto was the brother that my mother's family didn't talk about. How were they to know that he was laying up treasures of oil and gold on the Arabian Peninsula?

The phone rang; Winnie had thoughtlessly put it back on the hook. "No!" Margery cried into it, hardly listening. "We don't want any uranium stock! We've got *closets* full of it!"

I said, taking advantage of the fact that her attention was diverted: "Winnie, I'm a busy man. How about if you tell me what you want?"

He sat down with his head in his hands and made a great effort.

"It's — difficult," he said, speaking very slowly. Each word came out by itself, as though he had to choose and sort painfully among all the words that were rushing to his mouth. "I — invented something. You understand? And when I heard about you inheriting money—"

"You thought you could get some of it away from me."

"No!" He sat up sharply—and winced and clutched his head. "I want to *make* money for you."

"We've got closets full," I quoted Margery.

He said in a desperate tone: "But I can give you the world, Harlan. Trust me!"

"I never have—"

"Trust me now! We can own the world, the two of us, if you'll just give me a little financial help. I've invented a drug that gives me total recall."

"How nice for you," I said, reaching for the knob of the door.

THEN I began to think. "Total recall?" I asked.

He said, sputtering with eagerness: "The upwelling of the unconscious—the ability to remember everything—the eidetic memory of an *idiot savant* and the indexing system of a quiz winner! You want to know the first six kings of England? Egbert, Ethelwulf, Ethelbald, Ethelbert, Ethelred and Alfred. You want to know the mating call of a ruff-necked grouse?"

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He demonstrated the call of the ruff-necked grouse.

"Oh," said Margery, coming back into the room with the freshly diapered baby. "Bird imitations."

"And more!" cried Winnie. "Do you know about the time the United States had two presidents?"

"No, but—"

"March the third," he said, "eighteen seventy-seven. Rutherford B. Hayes—I'd better say Rutherford *Birchard* Hayes—was about to succeed Grant and he was sworn in a day early. I ought to explain that—"

"No," I cut in. "Don't explain."

"Well, how about this? Want me to name the A.B.C. bowling champions from 1931 to date? Clack, Nitschke, Hewitt, Vidro, Brokaw, Gagliardi, Anderson—oh, wait a minute. I forgot 1936. That's Warren. *Then* Gagliardi, Anderson, Danek—"

"Winnie," I said, "quit it."

"But this is the key to conquering the world!"

"Hah," I said. "Being boring from within by naming bowling champions?"

"Knowledge is power, Harlan." He rested his head on his palms briefly. "But it does make my head ache."

I took my hand off the knob of the door.

I said grudgingly: "Sit down, Winnie. I admit you've got me interested. I can't wait to hear what the swindle is."

"Harlan!" warned Margery.

Winnie said: "There's no swindle, I promise you. To repeat, knowledge is power, Harlan. Why, with my super-brain we can outwit the rulers of any country anywhere. We can own the world! And—money, you say? Knowledge is money, too. For instance—" he winked—"worried about taxes? I can tell you the minority opinion in U. S. Govt. versus Oosterhagen, 486 Alabama 3309. There's a loophole there you could drive an armored truck through and come out with it loaded!"

MARGERY sat down with a cigarette in the long, long holder I'd bought her to square a beef the year after we were married. She looked at me and then at the cigarette; it penetrated and I raced over with a match.

"Thank you, darling," she said throatily.

She had changed herself as well as the baby. She now wore something more suitable for the coheiress of a big fat hunk of money to wear while entertaining an ex-husband. It was a gold lamé housecoat; she had bought it within an hour of the time the AP man had called, on a charge account we'd never owned until the early editions of the papers hit the stores around Levittown.

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And that reminded me. Money. Who needed money? What was the use of inheriting all that loot from Uncle Otto if I couldn't throw Winnie out on his ear?

Politeness made me temporize: "All this is very interesting, Winnie, but—"

"Harlan, the baby!" Margery yelled. "Get him out of the pretzels!"

I did, while Winnie said faintly behind me: "The shape of a pretzel represents children's arms folded in prayer—or so it was thought in the seventh century. A good pretzel bender can bend more than thirty-five a minute. Of course, machines are faster."

I said: "Winnie—"

"Like to know the etymology of the word 'navvy'? Most people think it has something to do with sailors."

"Winnie, listen to me—"

"It doesn't, though. It comes from the laborers on the Inland Navigation Canals—eighteenth-century England, you know. Well, the laborers—"

I said firmly: "Winnie, beat it."

"Harlan!"

"You stay out of this, Margery," I ordered her. "Winnie's after my dough, that's all. Well, I haven't had it long enough to want to throw it away. Besides, who wants to rule the world?"

"Well—" Margery said thoughtfully.

"With all our money?" I demanded. "Who needs it?"

WINNIE clutched his head. "Oh," he moaned. "Wait, Harlan. All I need is a stake. I've got the long-term cycles of every stock on the Exchange down in my head—splits and dividends and earnings records since nineteen ought four! I know the private brokers' hand signals on the Curb—wave up for buy, wave down for sell; look, see how my fingers are bent? That means the spread between bid and asked is three-eighths of a point. Give me a million dollars, Harlan."

"No."

"Just a million, that's all. You can spare it! And I'll double it in a week, quadruple it in a month—in a year, we'll have a billion. A billion dollars!"

I shook my head. "The taxes—"

"Remember U. S. Govt. versus Oosterhagen! And that's a bare beginning. Ever think what a billion dollars could do in the hands of a super-genius? Here!" he yelled, grabbing at his temple with one hand, pulling something out of his pocket with the other. "Look at this, Harlan! It's yours for a million dollars—ah, make it a hundred thousand. Yes, a hundred thousand dollars and you can have it! I'll sell it for that and then I won't split with you—we'll *both* be super-geniuses. Eh? Fair enough?"

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I was trapped by my own curiosity. "What is it?" I asked.

He waved it at me—a squat little bottle, half filled with pale capsules.

"Mine," he said proudly. "My hormone. It's a synapse relaxer. One of these and the blocks between cell and cell in your brain are weakened for an hour. Three of them, for every twenty pounds of body weight, and you're a super-genius for life. You'll remember things you think have passed out of your recollection years ago! You'll recall the post-partum slap that started you breathing. You'll remember the name of the nurse who carried you to the door of your father's Maxwell. Harlan, there is simply no limit to—"

"Beat it, Winnie," I said, and pushed him.

PATROLMAN Gamelsfelder appeared like a genie from a lamp.

"Thought so," he said somberly, advancing on Winnie McGhee. "Extortion's your game, is it? Can't say I blame you, brother, but it's a trip to the station house and a talk with the sergeant for you."

"Just get rid of him," I said, and closed the door as Winnie was challenging the cop to name an opera by Krenek, other than *Johnny Spielt Auf*.

Margery put the baby down, breathing hard.

She said: "*Scuffling* and pushing people *around* and bad *manners*. You weren't like this when we were married, Harlan. Something's come over you since you inherited that money!"

I said: "Help me pick these things up, will you?" I hadn't pushed him hard, but all the same, those pills had gone flying.

Margery stamped her foot and burst into tears. "I *know* how you feel about poor Winnie," she sobbed, "but it's just that I'm *sorry* for him. Couldn't you at least be polite? Couldn't you at least have given him a couple of lousy hundred thousand dollars?"

"Watch the baby," I warned her. At the head of the stairs, Gwennie appeared, attracted by the noise, rubbing her eyes with her fists and beginning to cry.

Margery glared at me, started to speak, was speechless, turned her back and hurried up to comfort Gwennie.

I began to feel a little bit ashamed of myself.

I stood up, patting the baby absent-mindedly on the head, looking up the stairs at the female half of our household. I had been, when you stopped to think of it, something of a clunk.

Item, I had been rough on poor old Winnie. Suppose it had been I who discovered the hormone and needed a few lousy hundred thousand, as Margery put it so

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well, as a stake in order to grasp undreamed-of wealth and power?

And, item, Margery did have a tough time with the kids and all, and on this day of all days, she was likely excited.

And, item—

I had just inherited a bloody mint!

THE thought came to me with sudden appalling clarity—why wasn't I using some of Uncle Otto's money to make like easier?

I galloped up the steps two at a time. "Margery! I'm sorry!"

"I think you should—" she began, and then looked up from Gwennie and saw my face.

I said: "Look, honey. Let's start over. I'm sorry about poor Winnie, but forget him, huh? We're rich. Let's start living the way rich people do. Let's go out, just the two of us—it's early yet! We'll grab a cab and go into New York—all the way by cab—why not? We'll eat at the Colony and see *My Fair Lady* from the fifth row on the aisle—"

Margery looked up at me and suddenly smiled. "But—" She patted Gwennie's head. "The kids. What about them?"

"Get a baby-sitter. Mrs. Schroop'll be glad of the work."

"But it's such short notice—"

"Margery," I said, "we don't inherit a fortune *every* night. Call her up."

Margery stood up, holding Gwennie, beginning to smile. "Why, that sounds like fun, Harlan! Why not, as you say? Only—do you remember Mrs. Schroop's number?"

"It's written down," I told her.

"No, that was on the cover of the old directory." She frowned. "It isn't listed in her own name—it's her son-in-law. Oh, what *is* that number—"

A thin voice from down the stairs said: "Ovington Eight Zero Zero Fourteen. It's listed under Sturgis, Arthur R., Forty-one Universe Avenue."

I said sharply: "Who the devil said that?"

"I did, Daddy," said the owner of the voice, all of eighteen inches tall, appearing at the foot of the steps. He had to use one hand to steady himself, because he didn't walk so very well. But in the other hand, he held the squat glass bottle that Winnie McGhee had dropped.

The bottle was empty.

WELL, we don't live in Levittown any more—of course.

Marjorie and Gwennie and I have tried everything—changing our name, dyeing our hair, even plastic surgery once. It didn't work, so we had the same surgeon change us back.

People kept recognizing us.

What we mostly do now is cruise up and down the coast of

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the U.S.J.I. in our yacht, inside the twelve-mile limit. When we need supplies, we send some of the crew in with the motor launch. That's risky, yes. But it isn't as risky as landing in any other country would be and we just don't want to go back to J.I.—as they've taken to calling it these days. You can't blame us. How would *you* like it?

The way it goes, we just cruise up and down, and every once in a while he remembers us and calls up on the ship-to-shore. He called yesterday, matter of fact.

He said: "You can't stay out there forever, Daddy. Your main engines are due for a refit after eleven months seven days of running and you've been gone ten months six. What are you using for dairy products? The load you shipped in Jacksonville must have run out last Thursday week. There isn't any point in your starving yourself. Besides, it's not fair to Gwennie and Mom. Come home. We'll make a place for you in the government."

"Thanks," I said. "But no, thanks."

"You'll be sorry," he cautioned, pleasantly enough. And he hung up.

Well, we should have kept him out of those pills.

I guess it was my fault. I should have listened when old Winnie—heaven rest his soul, wherever he is—said that the lifetime dose was three tablets for every twenty pounds of body weight. The baby only weighed thirty-one pounds then, last time we'd taken him to the pediatrician; naturally, we couldn't take him again after he swallowed the pills. And he must've swallowed at least a dozen.

BUT I guess Winnie was right. At the very least, the world is well on its way to being conquered now.

The United States fell to Juvens Imperator, as he calls himself (and I blame Margery for that—I never used Latin in front of the kids) in eighteen months, after his sensational coup on the $256,000 Question and his later success in cornering soybean futures, the common stock of United States Steel, other shares and commodities, then just about all of them. The rest of the world is just a matter of time. And not very much time at that. And don't they just know it, though; that's why we daren't land abroad.

But who would have thought it?

I mean I watched his inauguration last October on television. The country has had some pretty peculiar people running it, no doubt. But did you ever think you'd live to see the oath of office administered to a little boy with one hand upraised and the thumb of the other in his mouth?

— **FREDERIK POHL**

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Piloting one routine sightseeing space jaunt was all he had done . . . and it landed him in a one-man peep show billed as the notorious . . .

KINGSLAYER

By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by WOOD

THE Spurcans behind Allan Simber in the control cabin of the little ship were whistling excitedly. Shaped rather like balloons shaped like human beings, they had no backbone and virtually no bones, and the sibilant way they spoke showed they had no teeth either.

The members of the royal party were happy. They were delighted and relieved that this brief trip into outer space, just to be able to say they'd been, had gone so smoothly.

It was one of the least queer charters Allan had ever taken, for a private charter space pilot gets a lot of queer jobs. Except for the passengers, it was completely routine.

On landing at Spurc with a one-shot cargo from Rigel, he had been

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asked if his ship was absolutely safe and if he was fully competent to handle it alone. He said yes, of course, was asked if he would so state in an affidavit, replied he would, signed the aforesaid affidavit — and was given a contract to take King Phunk and several members of the royal retinue out into the void to see what it was like. One of the King's titles was King of Heaven, so it was only natural that he should want to take a close look at his own property.

Now, having flown around Spurc's two small satellites, the King and his retinue were not at all sorry to see the surface of their own world in the screens, gently coming up to meet them. This they understood. Though the Spurcans had never developed space travel, they had been using flying machines of one kind or another for centuries.

POTIN, the only member of the royal party who could speak English, lollupped up to Allan and asked in a whispered whistle if he was going to be able to land anywhere near the palace at Pluc.

"Sure," Allan said. "I mean yes. In the courtyard, if you like."

"Take no risks," warned the Spurcan. "Do it gentle, please, and agitate not the King."

"This landing," Allan said reassuringly, "will be as gentle as—"

He didn't get a chance to complete the simile. The ship lurched abruptly and began to spin violently. Checking his controls, Allan found that a braking jet had failed, and the compensator which was supposed to fix such a situation had failed too.

It took five minutes' desperate work that demanded all his considerable skill to get any sort of order into the story his dials told him, and by that time he knew that the landing wasn't going to be gentle at all, but exceedingly hard. Also there was no longer any guarantee where they would land. He'd settle for any kind of landing, anywhere, that left the ship in one piece.

He glanced over his shoulder. The bulbous little Spurcans had clustered protectively round their King and there was no more whistling. They didn't have to be told there was something wrong. Well, there was nothing he could tell them that would make any difference. They'd just have to take their chances, like him and the ship.

He still couldn't understand the the ship? Potin and the other Engfailure. Could some political enemy of the King have sabotaged lish-speaking Spurcans had poohpoohed any suggestion of putting a guard on the ship in which the King was to travel. The idea that

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a Spurcan should wish to harm King Phunk was unthinkable, and Potin refused to consider it.

Allan wasn't so sure. And he wished cordially that any disgruntled Spurcan subject who felt a pressing need to liquidate his monarch could have arranged it without involving Allan Simber and his ship.

An instant before contact, Allan shouted: "Now!" and curled himself into shock position.

The long slim ship landed on hard rock on a single fin. The fin crumpled, but its resilience had been enough to bounce the ship back in the air, where she fell over like a leaping salmon and crashed back on her belly. This time, as she bounced again, she turned nose-down and plunged at the rock, piling up on a broadening base of crumpled metal.

Deafened and bruised, but still conscious, Allan looked around the mangled cabin. The King and his retinue were smears of various sizes, shapes and colors on the floor, walls and ceiling.

THE conditions of imprisonment on Spurc varied with the crime and the degree of guilt. A Spurcan decidedly guilty of a small crime was kept in an exceedingly confined space. Anyone only potentially guilty of a large crime was kept in an exceedingly large space.

Allan Simber, accused of the murder of King Phunk, was potentially guilty of so vast a crime that the only fit place for his incarceration was the palace at Pluc. It was duly emptied of all its occupants and sentried by all ten thousand members of the Royal Guard.

He wasn't badly treated, and, having the entire palace to roam, he didn't feel too restricted. True, the largest couches or beds were less than four feet square, and the whole place had an overpowering scent of Spurcans, but men who spend their working lives in small spaceships, ferrying every conceivable cargo under the suns, get used to cramped bunks and sour air and learn to bear them philosophically.

He knew he could expect no help from Earth. It always took the attitude that Terrans who insisted on going to other worlds would just have to take pot-luck with the local laws and the local legal system. But Allan still wasn't worried about the outcome.

No doubt it was inevitable that any pilot under whose care the King came to an unpleasant end should be formally charged with negligence. Allan's case was clear — anyone who had evil designs on the King logically wouldn't risk killing himself merely on the off-chance that he'd escape and King Phunk wouldn't.

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Besides, these little Spurcans were reasonable enough creatures, though they had some queer ideas — housing a major defendant in a vast prison, for example. Yet even that made sense of a sort. The reasoning was that it was an insult to accuse any man of any crime, and the bigger the crime, the bigger the insult. Consequently, though someone suspected of a mammoth crime couldn't be allowed to roam around loose, he was given as much freedom as possible and treated with respect and consideration.

The only disturbing feature was that nobody told him anything and nobody came to see him. He was left alone in a palace which could house twelve thousand people.

The first day he amused himself by painting SIMBER ⟿ at strategic points on the walls all over the palace, the arrows pointing to the suite he had reserved for himself. After all, if the Spurcans didn't want their palace desecrated, they shouldn't have left any paint about.

On the outer door of the suite he painted:

ALLAN H. SIMBER
CHIEF PILOT
KNOCK AND ENTER

The second day he was wondering what to do when he heard footsteps — human footsteps — ringing in the corridors far away. They paused, presumably while the visitor looked for another arrow. Then they restarted again, presumably when he had found one.

Presently there was a knock and John Carruthers entered.

A FEW hundred humans, gaberoids and minscods lived in the cosmopolitan quarter of Pluc, trading or studying the customs, law, psychology, history, topography or botany of Spurc. Allan had seen Carruthers at the spaceport, but had no idea what exactly he was or did.

Anyway, he was glad to see him now. Carruthers was unbelievably British. He wore riding breeches, though there had never been a horse on Spurc, and spoke with an accent which would have made most people think of Oxford or Cambridge, except possibly graduates of Oxford or Cambridge.

"Well, old boy," said Carruthers genially, "you do seem to have got yourself into a spot of bother."

"I do," Allan admitted. "What are you—counsel for the defense?"

"No," said Carruthers apologetically. "There's no defense, you see. Actually, I'm your American ambassador."

"American?" Allan automatically echoed, though it was what Carruthers had said first which was occupying his mind to the exclusion of all else.

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"American—also British, French, Chinese, Italian, German, Norwegian and Dutch. The other countries have made no arrangements to be represented."

Allan went back to the main point. "What do you mean, there's no defense? You mean they're not proceeding with the charge?"

"No, my dear fellow. I mean you're guilty. You are, you know. Incidentally, before you start unburdening your soul, perhaps I'd better point out that the whole palace is probably wired."

Allan shut his mouth abruptly. Was that a warning that Carruthers himself couldn't say what he liked, that he had said Allan was guilty simply because the Spurcans might be listening? No, that was ridiculous.

"I'm guilty?" Allan said incredulously.

"Oh, indubitably! You must have been out of your mind when you signed that affidavit, old chap. You did nothing less than make yourself personally responsible for the safety of the King and his party."

Allan remembered the affidavit with misgivings. "But surely—"

"These people have no spaceships of their own, you know—just whatever old barges we can fob off on them. All they know about space is what we've chosen to tell them. We, of course, are the experts. When you said your ship was sound and an accident was practically impossible — naturally, if the King was killed, you murdered him."

SLOWLY, Allan realized the full import of what Carruthers was saying. "You mean they're not even going to *try* me?"

"Oh, there'll be a trial tomorrow. You won't be there. It'll be formal, with a verdict of guilty. I came to talk to you about your punishment. Thought you'd better know what to expect."

Allan sank weakly on one of the four-foot-square couches. Surely if all this was true, Carruthers would hardly be so breezily cheerful about it all.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" he asked.

"No joke at all, old boy. I must say you asked for it. Everybody knew for days that you were going to take the rajah up. That you'd promised it was safe. That there was no guard on the ship. Anybody who had any reason to want the old gentleman out of the way had only to—"

"But that's exactly it!" Allan exclaimed. "That's precisely what must have happened! When the ship cracked up I — well, I was ninety-five per cent certain there had been sabotage. Surely I can bring this up in court and . . ."

He stopped. Carruthers was shaking his head. "Apart from the

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fact that that's not legally relevant, it just isn't so. Take it from me, old boy, I've been here ten years and if anybody knows the Spurcans I do. Some murders are relatively unimportant. I expect Phunk had quite a few characters knocked off in his time, so I daresay he only got what was coming to him. But no Spurcan — absolutely none — would kill his King, any more than you'd throw a million dollars into space. The King is valuable, you see. You'll be punished not because these people felt great affection for King Phunk, but because you destroyed a valuable property."

"But . . ."

"Anyway," Carruthers went on cheerfully, "even if you don't take my word for it, the fact remains that the line of defense you planned holds no water, so to speak. You made yourself responsible for the King. He's dead. That's all that matters in Spurcan law. Now about your punishment. There will be three penalties—"

"Is that all fixed too?" Allan asked dazedly.

"More or less. The first punishment is starvation. For five hours."

ALLEN frowned. "Five hours?"

"That's inflexible—you know the Spurcans have to eat or drink something every half-hour or so. You're lucky. After five hours' starvation, a Spurcan is three-quarters dead."

"And they won't modify this for a human? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, for all of us here run foul of their laws at one time or another and are sentenced to the first two penalties. No nonnative has ever been sentenced to your particular third penalty so far. You'll be making history, my dear fellow. The three penalties—"

"Look," said Allan, making up his mind. "You may be right about all this, but I'd rather wait for the verdict."

Carruthers was surprised and pained. "You don't want me to tell you any more?"

"Not now."

"But don't you want to know about—"

"Is there anything I can do to get out of this? Anything I personally can do?"

"'Fraid not, old chap."

"All right then, I've got to leave it to you. You'll do what you can?"

"Naturally, but . . . This is most embarrassing. You see, there's absolutely nothing I can do."

Allan's brain raced. "Just a moment. There are humans here, and some gaberoids from Deneb and Merkat, and a few minscods from Mars, Sirius and Cephis. Right? What if one of them wanted to murder the King? They might have sabotaged the ship."

For the first time, a hint of mild

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irritation crossed Carruthers' face. "Can't you get it into your head," he said, "that it wouldn't do you any damn good even if you could *prove* that somebody tinkered your ship? Suppose I went into court tomorrow and said I burned half your braking fin off. They might put me on trial too, but that wouldn't do you the slightest good. You still would be guilty of regicide."

"I see," said Allan. "Oh, well. Can you come tomorrow and tell me what's been decided?"

"Of course. You don't want me to tell you about . . .? No, I see you don't. Still, there's one thing I must tell you—"

"If you don't mind," said Allan, "I'd rather wait."

"But this is—"

"Look," said Allan, "I learned a long time ago to take things as they come. I'd have terrified myself to death a dozen times if I'd assumed the worst, and the worst after that, and the worst after that. Right at this moment, nobody's slapping me on the belly with a wet fish. Let's leave it at that — okay?"

Carruthers shrugged, hurt.

FOR now, at least, the Spurcans certainly weren't starving him. Every third or fourth room had tables covered with fruit, sweetmeats, salads, cold meat, drinks of all kinds, and Allan let as little of it as possible go to waste.

Long ago he had found out that one man's meat was very seldom another man's poison, at any rate on worlds of similar metabolism. The Spurcans were warm-blooded, carbon-based oxygen-breathers. Most of their food suited humans. The rare exceptions looked, smelled or tasted unpleasant.

Eating with considerable enjoyment, Allan reflected that there was a lot to be said for Spurc. The climate was excellent and the food was wonderful. The little Spurcans, though definitely non-human, were by no means repulsive and they were pretty reasonable. He had found no difficulty in getting along with them.

The present situation was awkward but unlikely to be fatal. True, it was pretty silly of him to have signed that affidavit. Somebody should have told him. He admitted fairly, however, that he could easily have sought out the ambassador for advice, and hadn't.

Every pilot who takes a small ship around the Galaxy alone must be an optimist. And every pilot who has done it reasonably successfully for five years must have good reason for his optimism.

At least twenty times in the past five years, Allan Simber had been in situations from which the only person who expected him to emerge alive had been Allan Simber. And if a thing goes on hap-

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pening long enough, one develops skill in waiting it out.

For something to do, he searched for the concealed microphones and wires against which Carruthers had warned him. He found no sign of any such thing. Apparently he was under no direct supervision. Ten thousand Spurcans guarded the entrances, exits and walls. Within the generous boundaries of his prison, he was free.

The only thing that irked him was the silence. Poor little King Phunk had liked silence, apparently. Every room was sound-deadened; there were no windows in the palace and every ventilator seemed to have a sound-trap fitted. If Allan wanted to hear a sound, he had to make it himself.

It was because of the blank stillness that he heard something he would normally have missed. Someone or something was moving in the corridor outside. Not boldly, openly, like Carruthers, but stealthily, so silently that a breath of wind or even a ticking clock might have covered the soft padding.

Maybe they were guarding him closely after all. Yet the furtive sound didn't suggest Spurcans to Allan. They made a kerplunk, kerplunk, kerplunk on their short, heavy legs, no more capable of tiptoeing than bipedal pigmy elephants.

Whoever or whatever was trying to conceal its presence must be trying to conceal it from Allan. So he stood behind the door and waited for a while to surprise his visitor if it elected to come in.

Allan wasn't excited, merely interested. As he waited, he wondered whether to throw himself on the visitor the instant the door opened, if it did open. Might as well, he thought. If it was something he couldn't handle, at least he'd probably manage to bowl it off its feet — providing it had any feet.

Whatever it was, it could hardly be friendly.

Seconds passed and there was no sound. Allan was sure that the visitor was on the other side of the door, also listening. Well, in any contest of patience, Allan would win. Space pilots are unbeatable at waiting for nothing to happen.

The door opened a crack, then opened wider.

Allan sprang. Under him was something wet, slippery, but not repulsive.

It was a completely female feminine human mammal. He could see that with both eyes.

AS he helped her up apologetically, Allan began to wonder who was crazy.

The girl was a tall, well-stacked blonde with curves about which

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her two-piece swim suit was not reticent. Despite the swim suit and the water glistening on her skin, she was anything but an Amazon. She was definitely the crinoline, powder-and-patch type, the type whose bathing suit seldom gets wet.

In fact, she looked like an actress making an improbable appearance in a not very good movie.

"Don't tell me," he said. "You've come to rescue me."

She was still gasping and rubbing her diaphragm, with which Allan's knee had made violent contact.

"As a matter of fact, I did," she said in an injured tone.

"Did what?"

"Come to rescue you. I know a way out."

"You think you can get me out of here?" said Allan incredulously.

"I know I can, but not now. Follow me."

He did so, willingly.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Dawn Clifford. As if it matters."

"I think it matters."

She was almost running through the corridors. Once Allan steadied her as her bare foot slipped on the polished floor.

Right in the center of the palace, they came to a fountain in the floor.

"Ah," he said softly.

"I came this way," said Dawn, "and I'm going back the same way. Can you swim?"

"Yes."

"Under water?"

"Yes."

"Then you're okay. Only you can't come now — we'd have to come up in the middle of a public pool. It'll have to be at night, and not tonight either. I'm busy. I'll come for you tomorrow night."

"Can't I make it myself?"

"Not without a guide. Don't try. You'd drown."

She slipped into the fountain and began to lower herself toward a grating in the clear, cool water.

"Wait," Allan protested. "Why are you doing this? What—"

"I haven't time," she said nervously, not looking at him. "I've got to get back to the pool before I'm missed. See you tomorrow night."

Drawing a deep breath, she dropped under the surface to the grating. It was hinged. Once she had pushed herself through the aperture, the grating closed firmly behind her.

CARRUTHERS made his second appearance the next day.

"Well, old boy," he said apologetically, "it was just as I told you."

"You mean the trial's over?"

"Such as it was. You were guilty. All that was needed was a verdict. It's the three penalties, of

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course. The first one will begin immediately I leave. You get no food for five hours."

"You mean that really is the same for me as for them?"

"Yes. They like to regard themselves as a very just race, and all aliens on Spurc are subject to exactly the same law and exactly the same penalties as a native. The second penalty is three in one. It's the Three Unwishes."

"The which?"

"That's a literal translation. The Three Opposites-of-Wishes. The third penalty is—"

"Hold on. Let's stick to the Three Unwishes. What are they?"

"They'll find out the three things you most desire, reverse them and do them."

"How would they learn things like that about me?"

"By asking you, by truth drugs and other methods, they'll find out the three things you want most. You won't be able to stop them. Then they do the opposite."

He shrugged. "There are certain semantic difficulties, but I'm afraid a prisoner isn't allowed to argue his case. You have to accept their version of what's opposite. Suppose, for example, you wanted to be able to play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Some people might say that the opposite was *not* being able to play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto and that consequently they wouldn't have to do anything about it. I'm afraid that in such a case, however, the Spurcans would probably take the view that to prevent you ever being able to play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, they'd have to break your fingers or cut off your hands."

Allan shuddered.

"It may not be so bad," said Carruthers encouragingly. "I had to undergo the Three Unwishes once and nothing happened to me. Depends if you can get them to accept comparatively harmless desires or not. Obviously if what you most want is to live forever, the Three Unwishes could be pretty serious."

"I thought you said I wouldn't be able to stop them finding out the things I most want."

"You won't, but you might be able to finagle a little, knowing what's going to happen. I did."

"When does this start?"

"After your five hours' starvation are over. They'll find out your three main desires tonight and begin to punish you tomorrow."

Tomorrow. That meant that if Dawn Clifford succeeded in helping him to escape, he had nothing to worry about.

"They won't take me away from here?"

"Certainly not." Carruthers' gaze became quite keen. "Has anything happened since I saw you last?"

"What could happen?"

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"There might have been some spurious attempt to rescue you, for example. Probably by a girl of about your own age or a little less."

Allan stared at him in open dislike.

"I wanted to tell you," said Carruthers virtuously, "but you wouldn't let me. Traditions count for a lot on Spurc. Just as we see to it that people are defended in court whether they deserve it or not, Spurcans have attempts to escape. It doesn't seem decent to them that while a man is awaiting sentence, his friends and relatives, and particularly his wife or girl friend, shouldn't make any attempt to have him released. So they see to it that jailbreak attempts are made."

"But in the case of a human, how could they get another human to cooperate?"

"Easily enough. For money. If there was any such attempt — and I can't imagine there not being one — I think I can guess who you saw. Dawn Clifford."

Allan felt himself growing hot under the collar. He didn't necessarily trust Carruthers and he had no intention of betraying anything to him. Nevertheless, he couldn't help saying bitterly: "How could any human collaborate with those inhuman little balloons to torture another human?"

"If you mean how could Dawn do it, I'll tell you. She's an actress. Came here two years ago with a touring company. Fell foul of Spurcan law and isn't allowed to leave. Q.E.D."

"Why does any human ever come here?" Allan exploded.

"I don't know. Why did you come here?" Carruthers inquired politely.

THAT night the doctors, psychologists and scientists arrived at the Simber suite. None of them could speak English except the interpreter, whose job was simply to interpret anything the Spurcans wanted translated, not to enable Allan to say all he felt inclined to say.

They fastened plates against his skin, measured his blood pressure, checked his brain patterns. Technologically, they were several hundred years out of date, but that merely meant the methods were crude, not the results. Allan could be sure that since they were dealing with an alien, comparatively unfamiliar life-form, they had consulted the official intergalactic organism standards and consequently would be able to interpret his reactions only a little less accurately than human psychologists.

The first thing they established was that he particularly wanted to get out of Spurc. They didn't say anything, or at least the interpreter didn't translate anything.

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But it needed very little imagination to see that that would mean he was to be kept a prisoner for life on Spurc.

Now Allan remembered what Carruthers had said about Dawn Clifford. She had fallen foul of Spurcan law too, had been sentenced to starvation and the Three Unwishes — and naturally one of the things she most wanted had been to get away from Spurc.

It must be a not uncommon circumstance among visitors to Spurc who happened to get into legal trouble.

The second thing Allan desired was the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy. The third was a million dollars.

Three simple, straightforward desires. He wondered what they would make of the last two. Make him a present of the ugliest woman in the Galaxy? Claim that he owed them a million dollars?

The interpreter was speaking. Would he accept Dawn Clifford as the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy?

His thoughts raced. They knew he knew her. Therefore Carruthers was right — she had been hired to act a part. There had never been any real prospect of escape. The Spurcans had fixed the whole thing.

He felt sick. How could a girl like that do a thing like that?

The interpreter repeated his question. Would he accept Dawn Clifford as the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy?

Obviously it was in his best interests to say no. Then they'd have to find somebody else, somebody he would accept. There couldn't be many human girls in Spurc, and it would be a long time before any girl elsewhere could be persuaded to work for them in whatever way they planned. Maybe he could stall them for years over this. But what would he gain by stalling?

In a sudden spurt of impatience, he said, "Yes." Let them get on with it. Whatever happened, the sooner the better.

After that, they left him. And that night Dawn Clifford didn't come.

He climbed into the fountain into which she had disappeared, and found all the gratings as solidly latched as the back and side doors of the palace.

NEXT day he had an official visit, not from Carruthers this time but from Verin, the public prosecutor. He looked exactly like all Spurcans except that he had the brownness of extreme age. There were about thirty members of the Guard with him to protect him against the dangerous alien creature who had murdered King Phunk.

The Spurcans arranged themselves in V formation, with Verin

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at the apex of the V, farthest from Allan. Then he passed sentence in a musical whistle, and the interpreter interpreted.

"Allan Simber, human, regicide, this is your punishment. Having already been starved near to death—"

"Near death?" Allan exclaimed.

The interpreter wasn't allowed to do anything but interpret. "Having already been starved near to death—"

"When?" Allan asked. He didn't remember any five-hour fasting period. Then he realized that he'd slept most of the previous afternoon. They must have counted that. Well, if that was typical of the way they were going to punish him for his terrible crime, it was a good thing he hadn't lost any sleep worrying about it.

"Okay," he said. "I follow you. Go ahead."

"Having already been starved near to death," the interpreter continued, "you are now sentenced to the following Unwishes: One, you will remain on this world forever. Two, you will spend this night with the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy and will not possess her. Three, you will not be given a million dollars."

ALLAN burst out laughing. He didn't want to live the rest of his life on Spurc. But though they'd been able to keep Dawn Clifford a prisoner for a couple of years, they'd find it harder to watch over a competent space pilot.

He had no particular objection to spending a night with Dawn Clifford, even if that was all he was allowed to do. And the idea of not being given a million dollars didn't terrify him. It didn't even disappoint him. He hadn't ever counted on getting those million dollars.

"The third penalty," said the interpreter, "is death according to the manner of the crime."

Allan stopped laughing. "Huh?" he said.

"The third penalty is death according to the manner of the crime," the interpreter repeated obediently.

"Wait a minute," said Allan. "What's this all about?"

The Spurcans turned and trooped out, Verin in the lead now.

This time, when he'd have liked Carruthers to come and explain things to him, Carruthers didn't come.

The first penalty he hadn't even noticed. The second, the Three Unwishes, didn't seem to amount to anything except that he was never to leave Spurc — and he had his own ideas about that.

But a sentence of death — that was no joke. Semantic differences didn't stretch far enough to make it anything else but capital punishment.

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THAT night Dawn came to him. She entered wearing a long black cloak and stood across the room from him. No Spurcans came with her.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself," said Allan bitterly.

She didn't give the impression of acting a part now. "I'm sorry," she said, not sounding very sorry, "but I had no choice. Just as I have no choice now. You have my sympathy, but I have much more sympathy for myself. Frankly, I'd sacrifice you without uncurling a hair if I could get off this world."

He liked her better for that. When people were honest, at least you knew how you stood with them.

He looked around. "Where are the Spurcans?"

She shrugged indifferently. "Behind the walls. You've been under closer watch than you knew all the time you've been here."

"And what happens now?"

"Nothing unless you touch me."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. But something will. You'll have to try it to find out."

"I will. Later. Mean to say we just stay here all night, and as long as I don't touch you, nothing happens? That it?"

She shrugged again. "I guess so." He saw now that for all her lovely face and figure, she was a beautiful monomaniac with one ambition, one interest in life — to get away from Spurc. She really would sacrifice him or anybody or anything to do so.

"I like the Spurcans," Allan observed. "They really are fair, according to their lights. Carruthers gave me the idea they'd be pretty tough in their interpretation of the three Unwishes, but they seem to have been honest enough. They—"

"Don't talk to me about them!" said Dawn with suppressed passion.

"Why not? We're on their world."

"I hate them! I loathe them! My skin crawls when I'm near them!"

"Why, what have they done?"

"They didn't have to do anything! I just hate them!"

She shuddered, and Allan saw with interest that she could barely control her physical loathing of the Spurcans. It must be like some people's dread of spiders, or rats, or snakes.

HE began to feel sorry for her in his turn, imagining what it must be like to be imprisoned on Spurc with so strong an aversion to the bulbous little Spurcans.

"Why did you come here then?" he asked.

"How could I know? I'd never seen any of them on Earth. Look, I said let's not talk about them."

"Tell me one thing. After the

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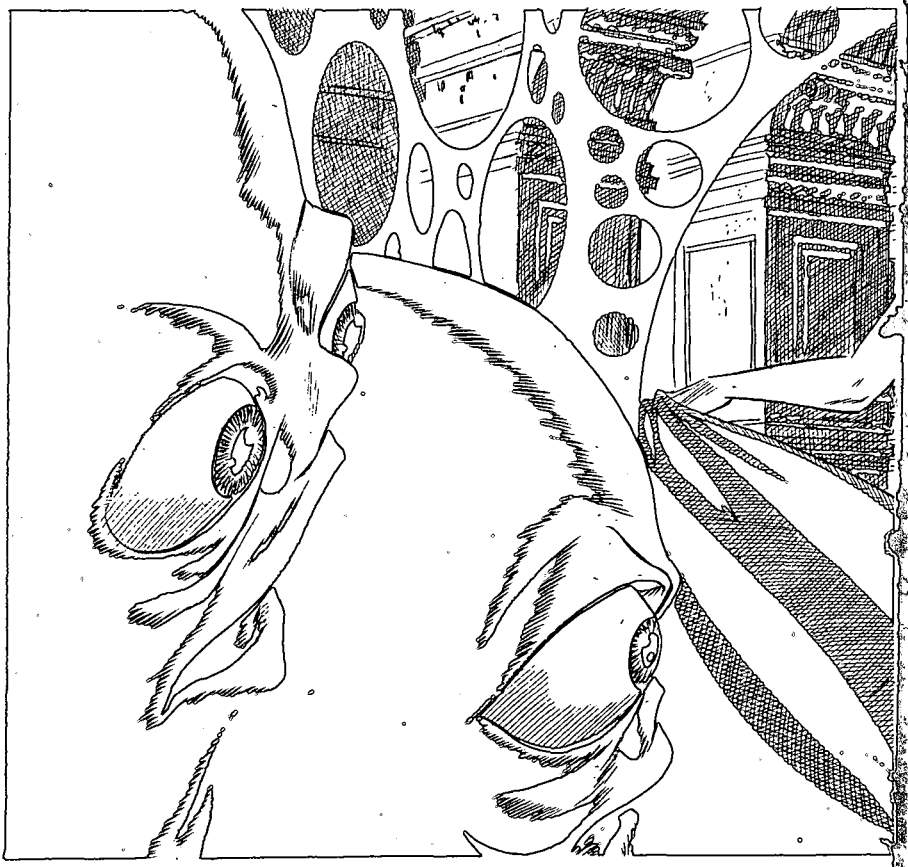

Three Unwishes, they say I'm to die according to the manner of my crime. What does that mean?"

"I don't know. For Pete's sake, don't get the idea I'm in their confidence. I just do what I'm told. All I want is to get back to Earth."

"And if you work for them long enough, they let you go — is that it?"

"The hell it is! When they sentence you to stay here forever, they mean it. I do as I'm told because I've got to, that's all. I don't get anything out of it but my food and shelter. Now shut up about the Spurcans, will you? Talk about Earth if you must talk."

With a casual movement, she undid the strings about her throat.

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The black cloak fell from her.

"Do you have to do *that?*" Allan exclaimed.

She nodded composedly. "Sure. You're supposed to be driven mad with desire, rush to embrace me, and then they do whatever it is they're going to do."

She started to walk about the room with slow, voluptuous steps.

"Do you have to do that *too?*" Allan asked in a strangled voice.

"Of course. You don't have to look."

Allan bore it for a few seconds. Then he stood up. "I'm going to find out," he said. "Do you mind?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She was always doing that. "Doesn't make any difference whether I

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mind or not. I hope they remember it's you who's supposed to be getting punished, not me."

Allan leaped at her and took her slight but curvy body in his arms. Instantly everything went black.

When he came to, he was on one couch and Dawn was on another, about two feet away, so that when he opened his eyes he was staring at her.

She opened her eyes a few seconds after he did, looked around and shuddered.

"If you have no objections," she said, "I'd rather you didn't do that again. After they knocked us out with the beam, they must have come in and lifted us here. I don't mind you touching me, but the Spurcans . . ." She shivered. "Let's just accept the situation, shall we?"

"Okay," Allan sighed. "It's accepted."

They weren't allowed to sleep. Bells rang when their heads drooped, and once, to Dawn's visible horror, a dozen Spurcans came in to shake her awake. She showed no desire to sleep after that.

They spent the night talking about Earth.

AS he took off, Allan was reasonably happy. If he had to die, he'd rather have it this way than any other.

The old, patched ship they had given him in place of his own handled like a tranquilized cow, but nevertheless he'd have enough control when the time came to make the end as neat and instantaneous as anyone could wish.

The Spurcans had told him that he had enough fuel to get into space, no more. They hadn't told him what was wrong, how they had ensured that when the old ship fell back into Spurc's atmosphere, he wouldn't be able to land her. It wasn't difficult to guess, however. The braking fins would go, same as before.

That was what they'd meant by "according to the manner of the crime."

He hadn't seen either Carruthers or Dawn Clifford again. He had no particular desire to see them. It was more than possible that on any other planet, even in space, Dawn Clifford might be worth knowing. On Spurc, however, she was nothing but a cold, beautiful phonograph record which played nothing except: *Let me away from here! God, how I hate them!*

He'd been glad to see the last of the palace, glad to get out into the city of Pluc, where at least there were sounds, happiest of all to get into a ship — even this antiquated derelict.

If he could manage it, he proposed to blow up right in the middle of the palace — to spit his life, at least symbolically, in the Spurcans' face. The annoying thing was that he didn't think they

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would mind particularly. They were more concerned that their version of justice should be done than over any damage he might succeed in doing.

The ship climbed. The drive had been set so that he could not cut it in less than ten minutes. Now, however, he found he could control it. He reached out to cut the drive, wanting to preserve as much fuel as he could.

"Don't," said a voice behind him.

He turned and saw Carruthers and Dawn Clifford. Dawn was smiling, happy. He hardly recognized her.

"Let it rip, old boy," said Carruthers. "I don't know how good a pilot you are, but if you're good enough, you may be able to get us to somewhere civilized."

"But . . ."

"We took care of the fuel. There's plenty. Also we patched up the damage they'd done before giving you this ship. Not very well, perhaps, but well enough to give you a chance."

Dawn was still smiling at him. "Hello," she said, offering her hand. "I'm Dawn Clifford."

"I know," he said, a little dazed. She looked like another person, with clothes on, and he found he liked this one better. She was bubbling over with happiness now, a warm, vital creature he had never seen before.

"No, you don't know me," she said. "We never met, did we?"

"I guess you're right at that," confessed Allan. "Pleased to meet you. And to my surprise, I mean it."

She laughed. "I'll go make some coffee," she said. "Spurcan coffee, I'm afraid. I don't mind any more. Oh, it's wonderful to be clear of that place!"

WHEN she went out, Allan turned to Carruthers. "What *is* all this? Are you telling me this ship is all right?"

"Anything but, my dear fellow," said Carruthers genially, "but there's no need to crash on Spurc. I knew the Spurcans wouldn't guard this ship any more than they guarded your own. Why should anyone tamper with a ship that's already been damaged so that it must blow up?"

"I guess I've a lot to thank you for," said Allan. "And if it can be done, I'll get you both away safely. But what are you doing here, Carruthers? I know how much Dawn wanted to get away, but how about you?"

"I told you," Carruthers replied, "that I'd fallen foul of the Three Unwishes as well as you. Sooner or later, every visitor does. And naturally one of the wishes is always to get away from Spurc."

"I see," said Allan. "This was the only way we could all get

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away. You were pretty smart, Carruthers."

Carrurthers nodded. "I was," he agreed.

"When did you get this idea?"

"Not long before you took the King up," said Carruthers blandly.

FOR a moment, Allan didn't understand. Then anger spread through him as he realized what Carruthers meant.

"So you — "

"Well, after all, I've been a prisoner on Spurc for ten years. I didn't come here to be ambassador. I took the job because I had to eat. Every time a ship has blasted off, they've searched her to make sure that people like Dawn and me haven't managed to stow away. It seemed to me the only ship that wouldn't be searched was a ship that was meant to crash. So I had to fix myself up with a pilot and a ship that was meant to crash. That meant . . . but I won't insult your intelligence by explaining the obvious."

"You sabotaged my ship so the King would be killed?"

"Of course. I knew you'd make some sort of landing and would probably get out unhurt. But these puffy little Spurcans wouldn't have a chance in a rough landing. With your affidavit and a little finagling in court by me, that meant the three penalties for you culminating in this. I had to get Miss Clifford's cooperation, but if you want to whitewash her, it's easy enough — I didn't tell her about the plan until after King Phunk was dead. By that time, there was nothing for her to do but play along with me."

Allan found himself relieved that Dawn hadn't been a party to the plan from the beginning. But his rage against Carruthers didn't lessen. Carruthers had murdered poor little King Phunk and all his retinue and landed Allan in deadly trouble just to get himself off Spurc. And now he was gleefully proud of himself.

"I feel like smashing this ship on the nearest lump of rock," Allan said viciously.

"But you won't," said Carruthers, unperturbed. "Not with yourself and Miss Clifford aboard. Particularly Miss Clifford. Her presence makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Allan admitted. "I can't wring your neck without upsetting and maybe alienating her. Was that why you fitted her into your plan?"

Carruthers looked hurt. "Naturally," he said. "You don't suppose I'd leave a thing like that to chance, do you?"

He was shocked, horrified and still more hurt when Allan hit him.

—J. T. McINTOSH

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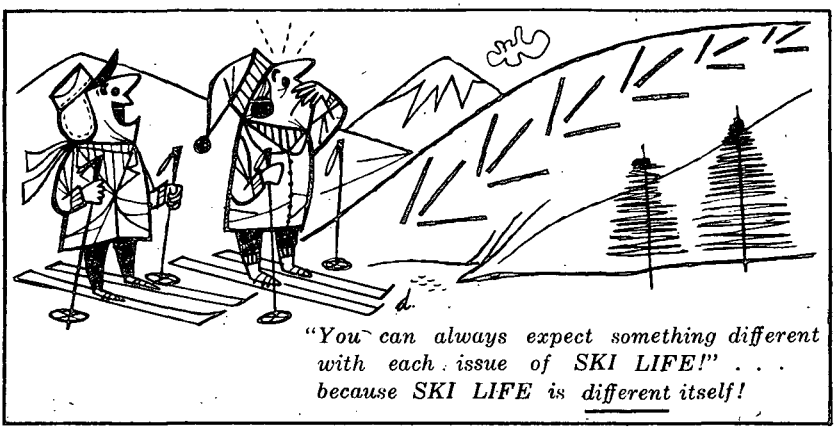

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LOVE CALLED THIS THING

By AVRAM DAVIDSON AND LAURA GOFORTH

It was all over and done with between him and eternity . . . so he had to come down to Earth!

NAN Peter Baker Four This Is Nan Peter Baker How do You Receive Me Over and now a word from Our Sponsor interviewed in his office the Commissioner said but Ruth I can explain everything there is nothing to explain David it's all too obvious I'm Bert Peel Officer and this is my brother Harry a cold front coming down from Canada and we've got to get word to the Fort colon congestion is absolutely unnecessary in men and women over forty at any one of the ninety-one offices of the Clinton National Bank and Trust . . .

"Embarasse de richesse," the French count had said when he looked at all the pretty girls on the high school swim team, and explained what it meant in Eng-

Illustrated by MARTINEZ

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lish. Penny wasn't really in love with him; she only thought she was, after pretending she was, to make David jealous, which she certainly did. But after the count gently explained to her, she and David made up just in time for the Spring Prom, which made the distant observer very happy.

At least he thought it did. "What is happy?" he often asked himself. Maybe just pretend. *You never really loved me Rick it was just a pretense wasn't it?* Like the distant observer thinking of himself as "him" when, really, he knew now — had known long — he was only an "it." *It's about time we faced up to reality, Alison.* Yes. It was about time. *We can't go on like this.* No, certainly not. It was time.

In the beginning, there was no time. There was sight—here dark, there bright. He did not know then, of course — and how long had "then" lasted? Memory did not tell that the bright was stars. And there was sound — whispering, crackling, shrilling. *What do you mean, Professor, when you say that outer space is not a place of silence?* And then (he knew now that this "then" was about fifty years ago) there had begun a new kind of sound. Not steady, but interrupted, and interrupted according to patterns. Awareness had stirred, gradually, and wonder. He knew later that this was "wireless." *CQ, CQ, CQ . . . SOS, SOS, SOS . . .*

And then the other kinds of sounds, oh, very different. These were voices. This was "radio." And music. It was too different; the distant observer knew distress without even knowing that it was distress. But he grew used to it — that is, distress ceased: but not wonder. Urgency came with the voices. What? *What?* He groped for meaning, not even knowing what meaning was.

PRESENTLY there was another kind of sight, not just the dark and the stars any longer, but pictures — flickering, fading, dancing, clear, pictures upon pictures. Gradually he learned selectivity — how to concentrate upon one, how to not-see, not-hear the others. Still later: how to see and hear all without confusion. How to match sound and sight. That things had names. What people were, who made the voices and the music. What meaning was.

About himself, he learned nothing directly. For a while, he had tried to speak to them, but it was apparent that nothing of him reached Earth. He had learned Earth, yes. And knew what this place was, where he was. An asteroid. How had he come to be there? This was in space. There were spaceships — he saw the scenes on television. Meteors were

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dangerous to spaceships. He knew meteors. Sometimes spaceships crashed. He scanned all his little world, but there was no spaceship, crashed or otherwise.

You've got to help me — I don't know who I am! But that was more easy, oh, so much more so — that one was a man, and there were many men. The sponsors (in this case, Muls, the creamy-smooth deodorant) were men, too. Everybody was very kind to this man. He had amnesia. What was odor? This the observer could not understand. But to have no memory, this he understood very well. This he shared with men.

Gradually he had come to share many things with men. They spoke different languages, but the one which came with the first pictures was English. English from America. Later on, there was English from England, there was French, Russian, Spanish, Japanese — but American was first and best. So much more interesting than the Red Army and the hydroelectric dams, these stories of real life. Of love and sadness and of happiness.

Kid, there ain't no problem in all this world you can't lick if you really try. Very well, the observer would try. *You never know what you can do till you try.* His first attempt at taking shape wasn't good. It didn't look much like a man. So he tried again and again. Each time he grew better at it. It was true, what the people said. It was all true, every word and picture of it. *There ain't no problem—*

And so when it came time for his favorite Wednesday evening program, the distant observer was ready. Summoning all his effort, husbanding all his energy, he passed along the wave length as a man walks down a street. There was a slight jar, a click. He realized that he could never undo what had just been done. There was a new body now, a new metabolism. *The past is dead, David. We have to live for the future.*

"And what is your name — my, you got up here but quick!" burbled Keith Kane, the M.C. of Cash or Credit. "I've never known a volunteer from our happy studio audience to manage it quite so suddenly. This is just the warm-up, sir, so you needn't be nervous. Not that you need the reassurance — cool as a cucumber, isn't he, folks? Say, did you folks ever hear the story about the little Sunday School boy who said that King Solomon had three hundred wives and six hundred cucumbers? Wow! I'm *really* naughty! You other folks who volunteered just take seats right there—"

THE first lady volunteer was old and pretty. Well, maybe not so old. But maybe like Mary

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Clay who realized that she was too old for young David Webster and after she cried she accepted the fact and sent him back to Madge Barkley whom he really loved all the while, only they had this silly quarrel.

The lady smiled at him. He smiled back. *I — feel — GREAT!*

"—So that's the way the rules work, and now, folks, in just five seconds we'll be on the air! Five—four — three — two — one — Good evening, all you lovely people out there in TV Land! This is Keith Kane, bringing you the great — the greater — the GREATEST quiz program ever: *Cash or Credit?*"

Now he felt his heart beating very fast. So that was what it was like! And now he knew what was odor. But the lovely lady volunteer next to him smelled, yes, that was sweet. But if it was Muls or Van Art Number Three, this he would learn later.

"—just rinse and dry, folks, that's all there is to it: Clear-o, the all-purpose *vegetable* detergent. And now whom have we here? What is your name, sir?"

Here it was. And how terrible if he should break down and press his hands to his head and sob, "I — I — don't — *know!*" But he did know; he had it all ready. "David. My name is David Taylor." All the ones named David were good. Oh, they had their troubles, but in the end everyone loved them. And see: nice Keith Kane beaming. The lady, too.

"Well, David, what'll it be? Cash—or—Credit? You know the rules: If you pick Cash, we spin this little wheel. If it comes up with a number, you go on to answer — if you can, hah-ha—a question worth however many thousand dollars follow that number. If it comes up blank — you're out. Whereas, if you pick Credit, you take your place among the volunteers and if any contestant makes a boo-boo, why, you step into *his* shoes and *he* is out. Soooo—?"

"Take the cash and let the credit go," said David.

Grinning from lobe to lobe, Keith Kane asked the same questions of the lady, whose name was Mrs. Conar, Mrs. Ethel-Mae Conar, a widow; and received the same answer. The audience applauded, the wheel was spun, and it came up 10.

"Ten—thousand — DOLLARS!" screamed Keith Kane. "That's what your first question is worth and here it *is*: What former President of the United States is associated with this tune, and what is the name of the tune, which refers to his State? Remember, you have thirty seconds to think it over . . ."

David and Mrs. Conar won two hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars in *cash* before the program was over, as well as a year's sup-

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ply of Clear-o, and fifty shares of stock in a mink ranch; and the band played "The Stars and Stripes Forever" as Keith Kane counted out the money. Mrs. Conar had kissed him and kissed David and was now clasping his hands and sobbing that she didn't believe it.

"Oh, it's true," David assured her. "It's all true; that's the funny part of it." (David Mackay said that, in *Matinée,* when he admitted his wife was an alcoholic.) Sight and sound and touch (kissing was pleasant; no wonder it was so much done) and smell and — and —what was the other? Taste. Keith Kane bawled at him the question of what he was going to do with all his money. David deliberated. What was it that Clem Clooten, on *Saddle-Galled,* had said, the time he broke the faro bank in Dogie City? Taste . . . yes: "I'm goin' out 'n buy m'self a cup o' java . . ." The audience went *wild.*

JAVA tasted. Taste was as exciting as the other four sensations. And sitting next to him on the counter-stool was Mrs. Ethel-Mae Conar, gazing at his distinguished profile. It was clean-cut; all Davids were clean-cut. He gazed down at her. He was tall, of course.

He searched for the right words. It turned out to be singular. "Happy?" he asked.

She sighed, nodded. Then — "You're a rather strange young man," she said. "Do you know that?"

Certainly he knew it.

He leaned closer. "This is bigger than both of us," he said huskily. "Let me take you away from all this . . ."

"I certainly *will,*" she said briskly, "right over to my place in the Surrey-Regis on Park Avenue—" That meant she was unhappy despite her money! — "where we can have a *decent* cup of coffee."

The counterman scowled at the bill David offered him. "Whatsis? Play-money? A five-hunnerd-dolla bill? Whuddya, wise guy?"

David arose slowly, buttoning his jacket, and leaned over. "If you're looking for trouble, buddy . . ." he said. But the guy chickened out. Anyway, Ethel-Mae had some change in her purse. "Taxi!" David called happily. He helped her in, sank back in the seat, and when the driver asked Where To, David said crisply, "Follow that cab!"

The driver (Herman Bogancz, the license read) half-turned, half-growled. Ethel-Mae laughed. "Oh, if you aren't — never mind, driver: the Surry-Regis, on Park near—" But H. Bogancz muttered that he knew where the place was.

David gazed out the window excitedly. Everywhere, men and lights and women and automo-

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biles. "Little old New York," he murmured.

Suddenly she yelped, dug her fingers into his arm.

"Darling!" he exclaimed. "Are you all right? Is anything wrong?"

"No," she said. "Oh, no—"

"*Some*thing must be wrong," he insisted. "You can tell me, dear. I trust you. No matter what you've done—"

"What I've *done?*" she screamed. "I've just won a half-share in $285,000 is what—"

He seized her, turned her facing him. "Are you out of your *mind?*" he gritted. And then, memory returning, he released her. "Yeah . . . Gee . . . that's right. Yeah . . . how *about* that? Do you know what this *means?* Ethel-Mae, we're *rich!* WE'RE RICH!"

The driver twisted his chin slightly to the right. "Do y' mind, mister? Not so loud with the decibels. I gotta near condition."

David said, shocked, "If there's anything I can do — anything at all — if you need money — we'll get the best surgeon there is—"

Herman Bogancz shrugged. "My cousin Sidney is the best surgeon there is, and he says an operation wouldn't help."

"Then," said David, "there's nothing more that any of us can do — except wait — and pray—"

"—and wash it out three times a day with a boric acid solution," said Herman Bogancz.

DAVID didn't quite understand why Mrs. Coran made him apply for a room at the Surrey-Regis by himself while she went up to her room through the side entrance. In fact, he didn't understand at all. The clerk looked at him rather oddly when he explained this to him and asked for a room near hers. He looked even odder when he saw the $500 bill. Once again David buttoned his jacket (it had been necessary to unbutton it first) and leaned over. "I hope," he said, "that I'm not going to have any trouble with you."

"Oh, dear me, no," said the clerk. "Not at all . . . my goodness, Mr. Taylor, but you really are tall, aren't you? Suite 516. Mrs. Coran's is Suite 521 — that's the best I can do right just this very *min*ute, and—"

Another gentleman materialized at David's elbow. "Good evening, sir," he said suavely. "I am Mr. Feltz, the manager. Is everything all right?"

"The boy's not to blame," David said, gesturing toward the clerk. "Society is to blame—we're *all* to blame. It's these crazy, mixed-up times we live in."

Behind David's back, the clerk spread open the $500 bill for Mr. Feltz's inspection.

"How right you are, sir," said Mr. Feltz.

"About the gentleman's — Mr. Taylor's change, Mr. Feltz—?"

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David turned, put his hand on the clerk's shoulder. The man flushed, sucked in his lower lip. "That's for *you,* sonny. There is no such thing as a bad boy. I never met a man I didn't like."

"Front!" said the clerk, his voice tremulous.

Mr. Feltz handed the keys to 516 to the bellboy himself, urged Mr. Taylor to make his wants known immediately. As David walked toward the elevator, the manager turned to his subordinate. "The Rich," he said simply. The clerk nodded solemnly. "We know their ways," said Mr. Feltz. "Eh? Well, that's very generous of you, Robert—but, no, sixty-forty is good enough. He seems to have taken a liking to you. Send up flowers, the morning papers, a split of champagne. And include my card, Robert."

As soon as the bellboy had gone (rather like a satisfied customer on his way out of a high-class opium den, with a $500 bill clutched in his hot hand), David went down the corridor and knocked on the door of Suite 521. "Ethel-Mae?" he asked, his face close to the door. "Dearest? This is David. *Please* open. I can explain everything."

And, sure enough, her words as she opened the door and fell into his arms were, "There is nothing to explain!" Then she said, "It's just that you're so sweet — and naive. But that nasty little nance down at the desk wouldn't understand."

Since David didn't understand either, he made no comment, but covered her face with kisses. "Darling, I *love* you," he said. "Please believe me." And she said, But she did — she did. "Do you know what it's like to be alone — always alone — never to know love? Do you? *Do you?* No. Of course you don't—"

Her answer was exactly correct. "Hush, darling," she said. "Everything's going to be all right." He sighed, kissed her again. Then—

"Ethel-Mae? Ethel-*Mae?* Mrs. Coran? What—? Why are you—" But she didn't seem to hear him. Nothing he had ever heard on radio or seen on television prepared him for what was happening now. But — he decided after a moment or so — what was happening now was —, though strange — not unpleasant. "This is wrong," he groaned happily. "It's all wrong. But I — I don't care. Do you hear, I don't *care!"*

IT was two in the morning before he stumbled back to his own room, and bed. At half-past two, he was awakened by the bellboy's father and mother (smuggled up on the service elevator) who had come all the way from Mulberry Street to kiss his hands. At three, he was half-awakened by a scratch-

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ing noise at his door. After a few minutes, he got up and — after approaching it as cautiously as the Sheriff of Hangtown on the program of the same name — threw it suddenly open.

A pretty girl with her red hair in a pony-tail uttered a little scream. Pencil and notebook fell to the floor. "Why — you — you're only a *child!*" he said, in a hushed voice.

"Mr. T-Taylor — " she began very nervously. "I saw you at the studio and I fol—followed you—" she gulped — "over here. But it took till now for me to get up nerve—"

"Why, you're frightened," he said, looking down at her. "Don't be frightened. You don't *ever* have to be frightened of *me*. Come in," he urged. "Please come in."

She picked up her notebook and followed him in obediently. Then, taking the seat he gestured to, she said, "And I'm not such a child, either. I'm a senior at Barnard. Journalism major. And I want a story from you, Mr. Taylor, before all the other reporters get here. Please, Mr. Taylor, *please*."

He looked at her admiringly. "That took guts," he said. "Where I come from, the men get separated from the boys mighty young. But—don't call me 'Mr. Taylor'—Mr. Taylor has gray hair at the temples. Call me 'David'."

She called him David. And she told him that her name was Pamela Novack. And he said that Pamela was a lovely name. She told him that she'd hated it as a child, but that lately — in fact, just this very minute — she'd gotten to like it a whole lot more. And they laughed. They laughed a whole lot.

Before they knew it, it was getting light.

"Oh, golly," Pamela sighed. "Oh, gee, have I got a story! In a way, it's so sad, you having such an unhappy childhood, I mean; your mother dying from the brain tumor and your father being an alcoholic—"

He said that was all in the past. He said they had to start looking toward the future. She nodded soberly. Then she stretched and said she was hungry.

"Hey, how about that!" David laughed, catching sight of his face in the mirror. It was a nice face. He had done well in making it; it looked like all the Davids he had ever seen. "You know something? I'm hungry, too! I haven't had a bite to eat since that cup of coffee after the show. Would you like to have some breakfast? You *would?* Hot diggety! . . . Hello? I want Room Service, please."

The narcoleptic tones of the operator said, Not till ha'pas'six. And then suddenly were clear and alert and saying, "Oh, Mr. *Taylor?* Pardon me—of *course*, Mr.

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Taylor — what would you like? Scrambled eggs and coffee and toast and gallons of orange juice. Yes, *sir*, Mr. Taylor."

Then, suddenly, the smile was gone from David's face. Anxiously, Pamela asked what the matter was. Scowling, he mimicked, "'Yes, Mr. Taylor, certainly, Mr. Taylor'—*it isn't me they like—nobody likes me* — it's the money. Once you been in reform school, nobody has any use for you, the cops are always watching you, the nice girls don't want to have anything to do with you—"

Pamela was troubled. "Oh, you *mustn't* say that. I — I — well, I think *I'm* a nice girl—" she blushed suddenly, looked down—"and I — like you—David."

HE got up and walked back and forth, rubbing his left arm with his right hand. He swung around and faced her. "You!" he jeered. "Whadda *you* know? You're just a fresh young kid—"

"I am not!" she snapped.

"A senior at Barnard! Whadda you know about life? You—"

He stopped. He had been enjoying the experience of emoting so much that the significance of the scene had escaped him. *They were quarreling!* That meant they were in love! Of course—Davids always quarreled with the girls they were really in love with.

He dropped down on one knee beside her and looked into her flushed, pretty face.

"Darling," he said brokenly, taking her hands. "Trust me — I can't explain now—but just trust me—"

There was a sound from the door. They looked up. Ethel-Mae Conar stood there, holding her throat with both hands. After a moment, she said, "I must have hurt you very much, David, for you to have done — *this* — to me — to have forgotten. So quickly."

Exquisitely miserable, he shouted, "Leave me alone! Can't you leave me alone? Can't you understand that it's all over between us?" And then, his voice dropping, "Oh, Ethel-Mae, forgive me. I didn't mean to say that. I didn't mean it. I—I can explain."

Letting her hands drop resignedly, she said, "There's nothing to explain, David. I understand. It could never have worked out. I'm —I'm just—too *old* for you, David." She walked over, lifted his head (he had hung it, of course), placed her palms on his cheeks and kissed him gently on the forehead. Then she turned to Pamela and said softly, "Be good to him, my dear. And give him lots of love." She went out, her head high, a wistful smile on her lips, and the awareness that she had half of the $285,000, the year's supply of Clear-o (the *vegetable* detergent), and the fifty shares of stock in a mink ranch.

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There was a moment's silence. Then, "Gosh," said Pamela. "Golly," she said.

David turned to her. "Darling, don't cry any more," he begged. "Everything's going to be all right from now on."

"I'm not crying," she said. Her eyes were shining. "The hell with the story and the journalism course and the hell with Barnard, too. With all your money," she said, falling into his welcoming arms, "we can get married and start a family right away. Kiss me," she said, "hold me tight, don't ever leave me!"

MR. and Mrs. David Taylor live in a fifteen-room house in Westport with two picture windows, three boxers, and three cars. They have two children and a third is on the way. They are as happy as any couple in Westport has a right to be in these crazy, mixed-up days. David is a highly successful writer of television scripts, with an unerring nose for what the public wants. It is perhaps unfortunate that his work brings him into contact with so many clever and attractive women. He is, of course, unfaithful to his wife with one of them at least twice a year (or at least once a year with two of them).

There used to be a time when a David would never do a thing like this to his wife. He would *almost* do it — and then, at the last moment, not. But TV is maturing. The Davids do it all the time. All the damned time.

"But how *could* you?" Pam Taylor weeps. "David, how *could* you?"

And young David Taylor, his face twisted with anguish, cries, "Don't you understand? Won't you even *try* to understand? *I'm sick! I need help!*"

Well. Naturally Pam is very sad that her husband is sick, sick, sick—but, after all, it's the thing to be, isn't it? And so she's happy she can help him and happily she drives the two of them down to Dr. Naumbourg. David is very sad that he's made his lovely wife unhappy, but he's happy that he's fulfilling his destiny as a David. Dr. Naumbourg always insists on both husbands *and* wives Going Into Therapy at the same time. Pamela's case is a common enough one, merely a routine phallic envy. Naumbourg gets them every day.

But in all the years since Vienna, Dr. N. has never had another patient whose womb-fantasy takes the form of being a Thing on an asteroid. And so, while all three of them are very happy, Dr. Naumbourg is perhaps the happiest of all.

— AVRAM DAVIDSON
AND LAURA GOFORTH

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THE SWEEPER OF LORAY

By FINN O'DONNEVAN

You wish a universal panacea? A simple boon to grant — first decide what part of you it is that you wish to have survive!

Illustrated by GOODMAN

"ABSOLUTELY impossible," declared Professor Carver.

"But I saw it," said Fred, his companion and bodyguard. "Late last night, I saw it! They carried in this hunter — he had his head half ripped off — and they —"

"Wait," Professor Carver said, leaning forward expectantly.

They had left their spaceship before dawn, in order to witness the sunrise ceremonies in the village of Loray, upon the planet of the same name. Sunrise ceremonies, viewed from a proper distance, are often colorful and can provide a whole chapter for an anthropologist's

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book; but Loray, as usual, proved a disappointment.

Without fanfare, the sun rose, in answers to prayers made to it the preceding night. Slowly it hoisted its dull red expanse above the horizon, warming the topmost branches of the great rain-forest that surrounded the village. And the natives slept on . . .

Not *all* the natives. Already the Sweeper was out, cleaning the debris between huts with his twig broom. He slowly shuffled along, human-shaped but unutterably alien. The Sweeper's face was a stylized blank, as though nature had drawn there a preliminary sketch of intelligent life. His head was strangely knobbed and his skin was pigmented a dirty gray.

The Sweeper sang to himself as he swept, in a thick, guttural voice. In only one way was the Sweeper distinguishable from his fellow Lorayans: painted across his face was a broad black band. This was his mark of station, the lowest possible station in that primitive society.

"Now then," Professor Carver said, after the sun had arisen without incident, "a phenomenon such as you describe could not exist. And it most especially could not exist upon a debased, scrubby little planet like this."

"I saw what I saw," Fred maintained. "I don't know from impossible, Professor. I saw it. You want to pass it up, that's up to you."

HE leaned against the gnarly bole of a stabicus tree, folded his arms across his meager chest and glowered at the thatch-roofed village. They had been on Loray for nearly two months and Fred detested the village more each day.

He was an underweight, unlovely young man and he wore his hair in a bristling crewcut which accentuated the narrowness of his brow. He had accompanied the professor for close to ten years, had journeyed with him to dozens of planets, and had seen many strange and wonderful things. Everything he saw, however, only increased his contempt for the Galaxy at large. He desired only to return, wealthy and famous, or wealthy and unknown, to his home in Bayonne, New Jersey.

"This thing could make us rich," Fred accused. "And *you* want to pass it up."

Professor Carver pursed his lips thoughtfully. Wealth was a pleasant thought, of course. But the professor didn't want to interrupt his important scientific work to engage in a wild goose chase. He was now completing his great book, the book that would fully amplify and document the thesis that he had put forth in his first paper, *Color Blindness Among the Thang Peoples.* He had expanded the thesis in his book, *Lack of Coordination in the Drang Race.* He had generalized it in his monumental *Intelligence*

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Deficiencies Around the Galaxy, in which he proved conclusively that intelligence among Non-Terrans decreases arithmetically as their planet's distance from Terra increases geometrically.

Now the thesis had come to full flower in Carver's most recent work, his unifying effort, which was to be titled *Underlying Causes of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Peoples.*

"If you're right —" Carver said.

"Look!" Fred cried. "They're bringing in another! See for yourself!"

Professor Carver hesitated. He was a portly, impressive, red-jowled man, given to slow and deliberate movement. He was dressed in a tropical explorer's uniform, although Loray was in a temperate zone. He carried a leather swagger stick, and strapped to his waist was a large revolver, a twin to the one Fred wore.

"If you're right," Carver said slowly, "it would indeed be, so to speak, a feather in the cap."

"Come on!" said Fred.

FOUR srag hunters were carrying a wounded companion to the medicine hut, and Carver and Fred fell in beside them. The hunters were visibly exhausted; they must have trekked for days to bring their friend to the village, for the srag hunts ranged deep into the rain-forest.

"Looks done for, huh?" Fred whispered.

Professor Carver nodded. Last month he had photographed a srag, from a vantage point very high in a very tall, stout tree. He knew it for a large, ill-tempered, quick-moving beast, with a dismaying array of claws, teeth and horns. It was also the only non-taboo meat-bearing animal on the planet. The natives had to kill srags or starve.

But the wounded man had not been quick enough with spear and shield, and the srag had opened him from throat to pelvis. The hunter had bled copiously, even though the wound had been hastily bound with dried grasses. Mercifully, he was unconscious.

"That chap hasn't a chance," Carver remarked. "It's a miracle he's stayed alive this long. Shock alone, to say nothing of the depth and extent of the wound —"

"You'll see," Fred said.

The village had suddenly come awake. Men and women, gray-skinned, knobby-headed, looked silently as the hunters marched toward the medicine hut. The Sweeper paused to watch. The village's only child stood before his parents' hut, and, thumb in mouth, stared at the procession. Deg, the medicine man, came out to meet the hunters, already wearing his ceremonial mask. The healing dancers assembled, quickly putting on their makeup.

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"Think you can fix him, Doc?" Fred asked.

"One may hope," Deg replied piously.

They entered the dimly lighted medicine hut. The wounded Lorayan was laid tenderly upon a pallet of grasses and the dancers began to perform before him. Deg started a solemn chant.

"That'll never do it," Professor Carver pointed out to Fred, with the interested air of a man watching a steam shovel in operation. "Too late for faith healing. Listen to his breathing. Shallower, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," Fred said.

Deg finished his chant and bent over the wounded hunter. The Lorayan's breathing was labored. It slowed, hesitated . . .

"It is time!" cried the medicine man. He took a small wooden tube cut of his pouch, uncorked it, and held it to the dying man's lips. The hunter drank. And then —

Carver blinked, and Fred grinned triumphantly. The hunter's breathing was becoming stronger. As they watched, the great gash became a line of scar tissue, then a thin pink mark, then an almost invisible white line.

The hunter sat up, scratched his head, grinned foolishly and asked for something to drink, preferably intoxicating.

Deg declared a festival on the spot.

CARVER and Fred moved to the edge of the rain-forest for a conference. The professor walked like a man in a dream. His pendulous lower lip was thrust out and occasionally he shook his head.

"How about it?" Fred asked.

"It shouldn't be possible," said Carver dazedly. "No substance in nature should react like that. And you saw it work last night also?"

"Damned well right," Fred said. "They brought in this hunter — he had his head pulled half off. He swallowed some of that stuff and healed right before my eyes."

"Man's age-old dream," Carver mused. "A universal panacea!"

"We could get any price for stuff like that," Fred said.

"Yes, we could—as well as performing a duty to science," Professor Carver reminded him sternly. "Yes, Fred, I think we should obtain some of that substance."

They turned and, with firm strides, marched back to the village.

Dances were in progress, given by various members of the beast cults. At the moment, the Sathgohani, a cult representing a medium-sized deerlike animal, were performing. They could be recognized by the three red dots on their foreheads. Waiting their turn were the men of the Dresfeyxi and the Taganyes, cults representing other forest animals. The beasts adopted by the cults were taboo and there was an absolute injunction against

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their slaughter. Carver had been unable to discover the rationale behind this rule. The Lorayans refused to speak of it.

Deg, the medicine man, had removed his ceremonial mask. He was seated in front of his hut, watching the dancing. He arose when the Earthmen approached him.

"Peace!" he said.

"Sure," said Fred. "Nice job you did this morning."

Deg smiled modestly. "The gods answered our prayers."

"The gods?" said Carver. "It looked as though the serum did most of the work."

"Serum? Oh, the sersee juice!" Deg made a ceremonial gesture as he mentioned the name. "Yes, the sersee juice is the mother of the Lorayan people."

"We'd like to buy some," Fred said bluntly, ignoring Professor Carver's disapproving frown. "What would you take for a gallon?"

"I am sorry," Deg said.

"How about some nice beads? Mirrors? Or maybe a couple of steel knives?"

"It cannot be done," the medicine man asserted. "The sersee juice is sacred. It must be used only for holy healing."

"Don't hand me that," Fred said, a flush mounting his sallow cheek. "You gooks think you can —"

"We quite understand," Carver broke in smoothly. "We know about sacred things. Sacred things are sacred. They are not to be touched by profane hands."

"Are you crazy?" Fred whispered in English.

"You are a wise man," Deg said gravely. "You understand why I must refuse you."

"Of course. But it happens, Deg, I am a medicine man in my own country."

"Ah? I did not know this!"

"It is so. As a matter of fact, in my particular line, I am the highest medicine man."

"Then you must be a very holy man," Deg said, bowing his head.

"Man, he's holy!" Fred put in emphatically. "Holiest man you'll ever see around here."

"Please, Fred," Carver said, blinking modestly. He said to the medicine man, "It's true, although I don't like to hear about it. Under the circumstances, however, you can see that it would not be wrong to give me some sersee juice. On the contrary, it is your priestly duty to give me some."

The medicine man pondered for a long time while contrary emotions passed just barely perceptibly over his almost blank face. At last he said, "It may be so. Unfortunately, I cannot do what you require."

"Why not?"

"Because there is so little sersee juice, so terribly little. There is hardly enough for the village."

Deg smiled sadly and walked away.

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LIFE in the village continued its simple, invariant way. The Sweeper moved slowly along, cleaning with his twig broom. The hunters trekked out in search of srags. The women of the village prepared food and looked after the village's one child. The priests and dancers prayed nightly for the sun to rise in the morning. Everyone was satisfied, in a humble, submissive fashion.

Everyone except the Earthmen.

They had more talks with Deg and slowly learned the complete story of the sersee juice and the troubles surrounding it.

The sersee bush was a small and sickly affair. It did not flourish in a state of nature. Yet it resisted cultivation and positively defied transplantation. The best one could do was to weed thoroughly around it and hope it would blossom. But most sersee bushes struggled for a year or two, then gave up the ghost. A few blossomed, and a few out of the few lived long enough to produce their characteristic red berries.

From the berry of the sersee bush was squeezed the elixir that meant life to the people of Loray.

"And you must remember," Deg pointed out, "how sparsely the sersee grows and how widely scattered it is. We must search for months, sometimes, to find a single bush with berries. And those berries will save the life of only a single Lorayan, or perhaps two at the most."

"Sad, very sad," Carver said. "But surely some form of intensive fertilization —"

"Everything has been tried."

"I realize," Carver said earnestly, "how important the sersee juice is to you. But if you could give us a little — even a pint or two — we could take it to Earth, have it examined, synthesized, perhaps. Then you could have all you need."

"But we dare not give any. Have you noticed how few children we have?"

Carver nodded.

"There are very few births. Our life is a constant struggle against the obliteration of our race. Every man's life must be preserved until there is a child to replace him. And this can be done only by our constant and never-ending search for the sersee berries. And there are never enough," the medicine man sighed. "Never enough."

"Does the juice cure *everything?*" Fred asked.

"It does more than that. Those who have tasted sersee add fifty of our years to their lives."

Carver opened his eyes wide. Fifty years on Loray was roughly the equivalent of sixty-three on Earth.

The sersee was more than a healing agent, more than a regenerator. It was a longevity drug as well.

He paused to consider the prospect of adding another sixty years to his lifetime. Then he asked,

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"What happens if a man takes sersee again after the fifty years?"

"We do not know," Deg told him. "No man would take it a second time while there is not enough."

Carver and Fred exchanged glances.

"Now listen to me carefully, Deg," Professor Carver said. He spoke of the sacred duties of science. Science, he told the medicine man, was above race, above creed, above religion. The advancement of science was above life itself. What did it matter, after all, if a few more Lorayans died? They would die eventually anyhow. The important thing was for Terran science to have a sample of sersee.

"It may be as you say," Deg said. "But my choice is clear. As a priest of the Sunniheriat religion, I have a sacred trust to preserve the lives of my people. I cannot go against this trust."

He turned and walked off. The Earthmen frustratedly returned to their spaceship.

AFTER coffee, Professor Carver opened a drawer and took out the manuscript of *Underlying Causes for the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Races*. Lovingly he read over the last chapter, the chapter that dealt with the specialized inferiorities of the Lorayan people. Then he put the manuscript away.

"Almost finished, Fred," he told his assistant. "Another week's work, two weeks at the most!"

"Um," Fred replied, staring at the village through a porthole.

"This will do it," Carver said. "This book will prove, once and for all, the natural superiority of Terrans. We have proven it by force of arms, Fred, and we have proven it by our technology. Now it is proven by the impersonal processes of logic."

Fred nodded. He knew the professor was quoting from the book's introduction.

"Nothing must interfere with the great work," Carver said. "You agree with that, don't you?"

"Sure," Fred said absent-mindedly. "The book comes first. Put the gooks in their place."

"Well, I didn't exactly mean that. But you know what I mean. Under the circumstances, perhaps we should forget about sersee. Perhaps we should just finish the job we started."

Fred turned and faced his employer. "Professor, how much do you expect to make out of this book?"

"Hm? Well, the last did quite well, you will remember. This book should do even better. Ten, perhaps twenty thousand dollars!" He permited himself a small smile. "I am fortunate, you see, in my subject matter. The general public of Earth seems to be rather interested in it, which is gratifying for a scientist."

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Say you even make fifty thousand. Chicken feed! Do you know what we could make on a test tube of sersee?"

"A hundred thousand?" Carver said vaguely.

"Are you kidding? Suppose a rich guy was dying and we had the only thing to cure him. He'd give everything he owned! Millions!"

"I believe you're right," Carver agreed. "And it *would* be a valuable scientific advancement. . . . But the medicine man unfortunately won't give us any."

"Buying isn't the only way." Fred unholstered his revolver and checked the chambers.

"I see, I see," Carver said, his red face turning slightly pale. "But have we the right?"

"What do *you* think?"

"Well, they *are* inferior. I believe I have proven that conclusively. You might indeed say that their lives don't weigh heavily in the scheme of things. Hm, yes — yes, Fred, we could save Terran lives with this!"

"We could save our own lives," Fred said. "Who wants to punk out ahead of time?"

Carver stood up and determinedly loosened his gun in its holster. "Remember," he told Fred, "we are doing this in the name of science, and for Earth."

"Absolutely, Professor," Fred said, moving toward the port, grinning.

THEY found Deg near the medicine hut. Carver said, without preamble, "We must have some sersee."

"But I explained to you," said the medicine man. "I told you why it was impossible."

"We gotta have it," Fred said. He pulled his revolver from its holster and looked ferociously at Deg.

"No."

"You think I'm kidding?" Fred asked. "You know what this weapon can do?"

"I have seen you use it."

"Maybe you think I won't use it on you."

"I do not care. You can have no sersee."

"I'll shoot," Fred warned, his voice rising angrily. "I swear to you, I'll shoot."

The villagers of Loray slowly gathered behind their medicine man. Gray-skinned, knobby-headed, they moved silently into position, the hunters carrying their spears, other villagers armed with knives and stones.

"You cannot have the sersee," Deg said.

Fred slowly leveled the revolver.

"Now, Fred," said Carver, "there's an awful lot of them. Do you really think —"

Fred's thin body tightened and his finger grew taut and white on the trigger. Carver closed his eyes.

There was a moment of dead silence. Then the revolver explod-

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ed. Carver warily opened his eyes.

The medicine man was still erect, although his knees were shaking. Fred was pulling back the hammer of the revolver. The villagers had made no sound. It was a moment before Carver could figure out what had happened. At last he saw the Sweeper.

The Sweeper lay on his face, his outstretched left hand still clutching his twig broom, his legs twitching feebly. Blood welled from the hole Fred had neatly drilled through his forehead.

Deg bent over the Sweeper, then straightened. "He is dead," the medicine man said.

"That's just the first," Fred warned, taking aim at a hunter.

"No!" cried Deg.

Fred looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"I will give it to you," Deg said. "I will give you all our sersee juice. Then you must go!"

He ran into the medicine hut and reappeared a moment later with three wooden tubes, which he thrust into Fred's hands.

"We're in business, Professor," Fred said. "Let's get moving!"

They walked past the silent villagers, toward their spaceship. Something bright flashed in the sunlight. Fred yipped and dropped his revolver. Professor Carver hastily scooped it up.

"One of those gooks cut me," Fred said. "Give me the revolver!"

A spear arced high and buried itself at their feet.

"Too many of them," said Carver. "Let's run for it!"

They sprinted to their ship with spears and knives singing around them, reached it safely and bolted the port.

"Too close," Carver said, panting for breath, leaning against the dogged port. "Have you got the serum?"

"I got it," said Fred, rubbing his arm. "Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"My arm. It feels numb."

CARVER examined the wound, pursed his lips thoughtfully, but made no comment.

"It's numb," Fred said. "I wonder if they poison those spears."

"It's quite possible," Professor Carver admitted.

"They did!" Fred shouted. "Look, the cut is changing color already!"

The edges of the wound had a blackened, septic look.

"Sulfa," Carver said. "Penicillin, too. I wouldn't worry much about it, Fred. Modern Terran drugs —"

"— might not even touch this stuff. Open one of those tubes!"

"But, Fred," Carver objected, "we have so little of it. Besides —"

"To hell with that," Fred said. He took one of the tubes and uncorked it with his teeth.

"Wait, Fred!"

"Wait, nothing!"

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Fred drained the contents of the tube and flung it down. Carver said testily, "I was merely going to point out that the serum should be tested before an Earthman uses it. We don't know how it'll react on a human. It was for your own good."

"Sure it was," Fred said mockingly. "Just look at how the stuff is reacting."

The blackened wound had turned flesh-colored again and was sealing. Soon there was a line of white scar tissue. Then even that was gone, leaving firm pink flesh beneath.

"Pretty good, huh?" Fred gloated, with a slight touch of hysteria. "It works, Professor, it works! Drink one yourself, pal, live another sixty years. Do you suppose we can synthesize this stuff? Worth a million, worth ten million, worth a billion. And if we can't, there's always good old Loray. We can drop back every fifty years or so for a refill. The stuff even tastes good, Professor. Tastes like — what's wrong?"

Professor Carver was staring at Fred, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"What's the matter?" Fred asked, grinning. "Ain't my seams straight? What you staring at?"

Carver didn't answer. His mouth trembled. Slowly he backed away.

"What the hell is wrong!" Fred glared at Carver. Then he ran to the spaceship's head and looked in the mirror.

"What's happened to me?"

Carver tried to speak, but no words came. He watched as Fred's features slowly altered, smoothed, became blank, rudimentary, as though nature had drawn there a preliminary sketch of intelligent life. Strange knobs were coming out on Fred's head. His complexion was changing slowly from pink to gray.

"I told you to wait," Carver sighed.

"What's happening?" asked Fred in a frightened whimper.

"Well," Carver said, "it must all be residual in the sersee. The Lorayan birth-rate is practically nonexistent, you know. Even with the sersee's healing powers, the race should have died out long ago. Unless the serum had another purpose as well — the ability to change lower animal forms into the Lorayan form."

"That's a wild guess!"

"A working hypothesis based upon Deg's statement that sersee is the mother of the Lorayan people. I'm afraid that is the true meaning of the beast cults and the reason they are taboo. The various beasts must be the origins of certain portions of the Lorayan people, perhaps all the Lorayan people. Even the topic is taboo; there clearly is a deep-seated sense of inferiority about their recent step up from bestiality."

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Carver rubbed his forehead wearily. "The sersee juice has," he continued, "we may hazard, a role-sharing in terms of the life of the race. We may theorize —"

"To hell with theory," Fred said, and was horrified to find that his voice had grown thick and guttural, like a Lorayan voice. "Professor, do something!"

"There's nothing I can do."

"Maybe Terran science —"

"No, Fred," Carver said quietly.

"What?"

"Fred, please try to understand. I can't bring you back to Earth."

"What do you mean? You must be crazy!"

"Not at all. How can I bring you back with such a fantastic story? They would consider the whole thing a gigantic hoax."

"But —"

"Listen to me. No one would believe! They would consider, rather, that you were an unusually intelligent Lorayan. Your very presence, Fred, would undermine the whole thesis of my book!"

"You can't leave me," Fred said. "You just can't do that."

Professor Carver still had both revolvers. He stuck one in his belt and leveled the other.

"I am not going to endanger the work of a lifetime. Get out, Fred."

"No!"

"I mean it. Get out, Fred."

"I won't! You'll have to shoot me!"

"I will if I must," Carver assured him. "I'll shoot you and throw you out."

He took aim. Fred backed to the port, undogged it, opened it. The villagers were waiting quietly outside.

"What will they do to me?"

"I'm really sorry, Fred," Carver said.

"I won't go!" Fred shrieked, gripping the edges of the port with both hands.

Carver shoved him into the waiting hands of the crowd and threw the remaining tubes of sersee after him. Then, quickly, not wishing to see what was going to happen, he sealed the port.

Within an hour, he was leaving the planet's atmospheric limits.

WHEN he returned to Earth, his book, *Underlying Causes of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Peoples,* was hailed as a milestone in comparative anthropology. But he ran into some difficulty almost at once.

A space captain named Jones returned to Earth and maintained that, on the planet Loray, he had discovered a native who was in every significant way the equal of a Terran. And he had tape recordings and motion pictures to prove it.

Carver's thesis seemed in doubt for some time, until Carver examined the evidence for himself. Then

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he pointed out, with merciless logic, that the so-called super-Lorayan, this paragon of Loray, this supposed equal of Terran humanity, occupied the lowest position in the Lorayan hierarchy, the position of Sweeper, clearly shown by the broad black stripe across his face.

The space captain admitted that this was true.

Why then, Carver thundered, was this Lorayan Superior not able, in spite of his so-called abilities, to reach any higher position in the debased society in which he dwelt?

The question silenced the space captain and his supporters, demolished the entire school, as a matter of fact. And the Carverian Doctrine of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terrans is now accepted by reasoning Terrans everywhere in the Galaxy.

— FINN O'DONNEVAN

ANY IMPROVEMENT?

We asked last year how communities were doing for supplies of **Galaxy** — adequate or inadequate numbers of copies, regular or irregular distribution?

Readers wrote in. A lot of them.

The result was remarkably like a revised battle plan. Reserve copies were sped into lightly held towns. Fortified positions that had held out against science fiction were breeched. Copies were liberated from under-the-counter concealment and put in the front lines.

Everybody benefited, and our thanks to those reader-scouts who did a terrain-mapping job that we could never have done on our own.

But that was a year ago. How are things now?

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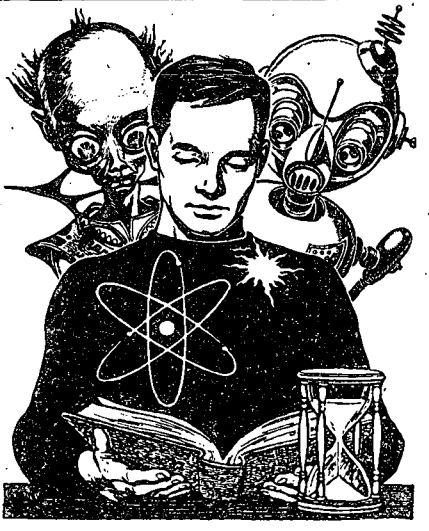

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GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

A CASE OF CONSCIENCE by James Blish. Ballantine Books, N.Y., $2.00

GENERALLY, SF authors steer clear of religious themes with greater reason than mainstream authors. It's a ticklish task even for the latter. In our specialized field, such necks stuck out usually mean heads lopped off. Very few successful examples pop into mind. Miller's "Canticle for Liebowitz" and certain shorts of Boucher's are most easily recalled.

However, religion is a most valid theme. That it is difficult to handle acceptably does not disqualify it. The reverse, rather — a challenge of this magnitude demands talent and skill equal to it.

Given that, the result is bound to be a significant one.

Blish's choice of a Jesuit as a member of a Planetary Commission is logical: Jesuits have long been explorers and scientists and doubtless will continue even beyond the Earth's atmosphere. His concepts and precepts are particularly controversial, as they must be in so foreign an environment.

Although the book tends to ex-

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treme unevenness, this profound story of an alien moralistic paradise, its inhumanly *good* code of ethics and the unintended threat to Earth's equanimity that it represents, is a provocative, serious, commendable work. Such trailblazers are exceedingly hard to come by.

FIVE GALAXY SHORT NOVELS, edited by H. L. Gold. Doubleday & Co., Inc., N.Y., $3.95

AS indicated by the title, all five novellas appeared in this magazine: "Tangle Hold" by F. L. Wallace, "World Without Children" by Damon Knight, "Wherever You May Be" by James E. Gunn, "Mind Alone" by J. T. McIntosh and "Granny Won't Knit" by Theodore Sturgeon. With introduction by Gold.

1001 QUESTIONS ANSWERED ABOUT ASTRONOMY by James S. Pickering. Dodd, Mead & Co., N.Y., $6.00

HERE are questions and answers in quantities sufficient to satisfy the most persistent astronomical pest.

Pickering, assistant astronomer and lecturer at the N.Y. Hayden Planetarium, has supervised their program of special performances for school children, business groups and conventions.

Random questions:

1. Why is twilight shorter in the tropics? 2. What was the Star of Bethlehem? 3. What is the solar phenomenon known as Bailey's Beads?

Incidentally, the title is too modest. There are 1049 questions by actual count.

ON AN ODD NOTE by Gerald Kersh. Ballantine Books, N.Y., $2.00

I HAVE always had small quarrel with the Ballantine squibs. However, to describe as science fiction this Kersh collection is considerable point-stretching.

A handful of stories touch the outer perimeter of fantasy-science: "The Eye," a transplant story such as underwent multiple jeopardy during Hollywood's "Karloff Period," but in Kersh's treatment head, shoulders, knees and ankles above its ilk; "Frozen Beauty," concerning a resuscitated Siberian Ice Age female; the time-warp effect of the Hiroshima bomb in "The Brighton Monster"—these qualify, but the remaining ten do not. Good fiction, yes. Science fiction, no.

Kersh is a phrase-turner of prime distinction: "To die, that's nothing. It's easier to die than to live, once you get the hang of it."

If off-trail, well-written fantasy is your dish, here's a tureen of it.

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THE TORTURED PLANET by C. S. Lewis. Avon Publications, Inc., N.Y., 35¢

THIRD of a trilogy, (*Perelandra, Out of the Silent Planet*) this book is another of Lewis's allegorical treatments of the conflict between biblical Good and Evil. Though less known than its famous predecessors, it bears the authentic stamp of its creator's awesome imagination — awesome in the archaic sense.

A tiny English college town is the apex of conflict; a stuffy young Fellow of Sociology and his clairvoyant wife are the axis around which the story revolves, the husband an unthinking tool of the evil N.I.C.E. — National Institute of Coordinated Experiments, and the wife the seer of the 78th Pendragon of Logres in direct line of succession from King Arthur. However, both earthly rival groups are merely tools of infinitely superior supra-normal forces.

From calm beginnings, Lewis's Apocalyptic warning is soon in full shriek, aided by such grisly shockers as the living Pavlovian head of a guillotined French murderer, the body of Merlin the Druid dug living from its age-old tomb, and a viciously sadistic female boss of secret police known as "Fairy" Hardcastle.

This is the kind of yarn over which oldtime Fen shake grizzled locks and disclaim sadly that "They don't hardly write them like this no more."

WHAT'S GOING ON IN SPACE by Commander David C. Holmes. Funk and Wagnalls Co., N.Y., $3.95

WITH Commander Holmes, the Armed Services have added yet another to their group of exceedingly articulate spokesmen. His breezily titled book is informative, authoritative and jam-filled and chockpacked with quotable bromides.

"The only way we could tell old time test pilots apart (sole interests: women and planes) was by the altitude at which we found them."

Following his conquest of space, "man as we know him today may become a period piece in the vast furniture of life."

"IPBM's (Interplanetary BM's) with H-bomb warheads could create new moon craters with unique opportunities for perpetuating the names of presidents, prime ministers and party secretaries."

Additionally, this is the best treatment to date of the first two Sputniks, three Explorers and first Vanguard. And, basing his guess on some sound information, Holmes is convinced that a successful moon shot by 1960 is a

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certainty. Maybe he and I are already too late with this bit of inside outfo.

THE BLUE BARBARIANS by Stanton A. Coblentz. Avalon Books N.Y., $2.75

COBLENTZ'S social satires hew to the formula laid down in Dean Swift's *Gulliver*. But where Swift is still highly readable centuries afterward, in only a quarter century the field has so far outdistanced Coblentz that his books seem older — and ever so much slower — than Swift's.

However, technical faults aside, Coblentz frequently gets across a telling blow at our sociopolitical setup. Twenty-seven years, one universal war and countless police actions later, some of his observations are as valid as most of Swift's are. In fact, now that we have the comic opera posturings and moralistic blatherings in the United Nations while conflict abounds at large, his picture of a ridiculous culture on Venus, highly industrialized yet socially nonsensical, has parallels that hurt.

So, although Pohl and Kornbluth, among others, have done far superior satirical jobs, Coblentz does retain a certain historical value.

JUNIOR EDUCATIONAL CORNER

SPACE BOOK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE by Homer E. Newell, Jr. Whittlesey House, N.Y., $2.95

THE period since Sputnik I has seen scores of space books published and I find arresting the fact that so many authors are part of the space program in one way or another. This is a far departure from the close-mouthed attitude of our Armed Services pre-Oct. '57. For instance, Newell has such unusual qualifications that I find it even more edifying to review the author than his lucid little book.

Three years teacher of mathematics at U. of Wisc., four at U. of Maryland; joined Naval Research Lab 1944; 1947, named head of Rocket Sonde Branch in charge of rocket upper-air research program; 1955, Acting Superintendent of Atmosphere and Astrophysics Division which includes Rocket Sonde, Radio Astronomy, Atmospheric Electricity and Aerology. Also Science Program Coordinator for Project Vanguard.

There's still more, but best of all — it's a good book, written by one with knowledge to impart and the knowledge of how best to impart it.

— FLOYD C. GALE

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When the People Fell

By CORDWAINER SMITH

The biggest news story in all history had happened centuries ago—but he was an eyewitness!

Illustrated by SIEGEL

"CAN you imagine a rain of people through an acid fog? Can you imagine thousands and thousands of human bodies, without weapons, overwhelming the unconquerable monsters? Can you —"

"Look, sir," interrupted the reporter.

"Don't interrupt me! You ask me silly questions. I tell you I saw the Goonhogo itself. I saw it take Venus. Now ask me about that!"

The reporter had called to get an old man's reminiscences about bygone ages. He did not expect Dobyns Bennett to flare up at him.

Dobyns Bennett thrust home the psychological advantage he had gotten by taking the initiative. "Can you imagine showhices in their parachutes, a lot of them dead, floating out of a green sky? Can you imagine mothers crying as they fell? Can you imagine people pouring down on the poor helpless monsters?"

Mildly, the reporter asked what showhices were.

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"That's old Chinesian for children," said Dobyns Bennett. "I saw the last of the nations burst and die, and you want to ask me about fashionable clothes and things. Real history never gets into the books. It's too shocking. I suppose you were going to ask me what I thought of the new striped pantaloons for women!"

"No," said the reporter, but he blushed. The question was in his notebook and he hated blushing.

"Do you know what the Goonhogo did?"

"What?" asked the reporter, struggling to remember just what a Goonhogo might be.

"It took Venus," said the old man, somewhat more calmly.

Very mildly, the reporter murmured, "It *did?*"

"You bet it did!" said Dobyns Bennett belligerently.

"Were you there?" asked the reporter.

"You bet I was there when the Goonhogo took Venus," said the old man. "I was there and it's the damnedest thing I've ever seen. You know who I am. I've seen more worlds than you can count, boy, and yet when the nondies and the needies and the showhices came pouring out of the sky, that was the worst thing that any man could ever see. Down on the ground, there were the loudies the way they'd always been —"

The reporter interrupted, very gently. Bennett might as well have been speaking a foreign language. All of this had happened three hundred years before. The reporter's job was to get a feature from him and to put it into a language which people of the present time could understand.

RESPECTFULLY he said, "Can't you start at the beginning of the story?"

"You bet. That's when I married Terza. Terza was the prettiest girl you ever saw. She was one of the Vomacts, a great family of scanners, and her father was a very important man. You see, I was thirty-two, and when a man is thirty-two, he thinks he is pretty old, but I wasn't really old, I just thought so, and he wanted Terza to marry me because she was such a complicated girl that she needed a man's help. The Court back home had found her unstable and the Instrumentality had ordered her left in her father's care until she married a man who then could take on proper custodial authority. I suppose those are old customs to you, boy—"

The reporter interrupted again. "I am sorry, old man," said he. "I know you are over four hundred years old and you're the only person who remembers the time the Goonhogo took Venus. Now the Goonhogo was a government, wasn't it?"

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"Anyone knows that," snapped the old man. "The Goonhogo was a sort of separate Chinesian government. Seventeen billion of them all crowded in one small part of Earth. Most of them spoke English the way you and I do, but they spoke their own language, too, with all those funny words that have come on down to us. They hadn't mixed in with anybody else yet. Then, you see, the Waywanjong himself gave the order and that is when the people started raining. They just fell right out of the sky. You never saw anything like it—"

The reporter had to interrupt him again and again to get the story bit by bit. The old man kept using terms that he couldn't seem to realize were lost in history and that had to be explained to be intelligible to anyone of this era. But his memory was excellent and his descriptive powers as sharp and alert as ever . . .

YOUNG Dobyns Bennett had not been at Experimental Area A very long, before he realized that the most beautiful female he had ever seen was Terza Vomact. At the age of fourteen, she was fully mature. Some of the Vomacts did mature that way. It may have had something to do with their being descended from unregistered, illegal people centuries back in the past. They were even said to have mysterious connections with the lost world back in the age of nations when people could still put numbers on the years.

He fell in love with her and felt like a fool for doing it.

She was so beautiful, it was hard to realize that she was the daughter of Scanner Vomact himself. The scanner was a powerful man.

Sometimes romance moves too fast and it did with Dobyns Bennett because Scanner Vomact himself called in the young man and said, "I'd like to have you marry my daughter Terza, but I'm not sure she'll approve of you. If you can get her, boy, you have my blessing."

Dobyns was suspicious. He wanted to know why a senior scanner was willing to take a junior technician.

All that the scanner did was to smile. He said, "I'm a lot older than you, and with this new santaclara drug coming in that may give people hundreds of years, you may think that I died in my prime if I die at a hundred and twenty. You may live to four or five hundred. But I know my time's coming up. My wife has been dead for a long time and we have no other children and I know that Terza needs a father in a very special kind of way. The psychologist found her to be un-

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stable. Why don't you take her outside the area? You can get a pass through the dome anytime. You can go out and play with the loudies."

Dobyns Bennett was almost as insulted as if someone had given him a pail and told him to go play in the sandpile. And yet he realized that the elements of play in courtship were fitted together and that the old man meant well.

The day that it all happened, he and Terza were outside the dome. They had been pushing loudies around.

Loudies were not dangerous unless you killed them. You could knock them down, push them out of the way, or tie them up; after a while, they slipped away and went about their business. It took a very special kind of ecologist to figure out what their business was. They floated two meters high, ninety centimeters in diameter, gently just above the land of Venus, eating microscopically. For a long time, people thought there was radiation on which they subsisted. They simply multiplied in tremendous numbers. In a silly sort of way, it was fun to push them around, but that was about all there was to do.

They never responded with intelligence.

Once, long before, a loudie taken into the laboratory for experimental purposes had typed a perfectly clear message on the typewriter. The message had read, "Why don't you Earth people go back to Earth and leave us alone? We are getting along all—"

And that was all the message that anybody had ever got out of them in three hundred years. The best laboratory conclusions was that they had very high intelligence if they ever chose to use it, but that their volitional mechanism was so profoundly different from the psychology of human beings that it was impossible to force a loudie to respond to stress as people did on Earth.

THE name *loudie* was some kind of word in the old Chinesian language. It meant the "ancient ones." Since it was the Chinesians who had set up the first outposts on Venus, under the orders of their supreme boss the Waywonjong, their term lingered on.

Dobyns and Terza pushed loudies, climbed over the hills and looked down into the valleys where it was impossible to tell a river from a swamp. They got thoroughly wet, their air converters stuck, and perspiration itched and tickled along their cheeks. Since they could not eat or drink while outside — at least not with any reasonable degree of safety — the excursion could not be called a picnic. There was something mildly refreshing about playing

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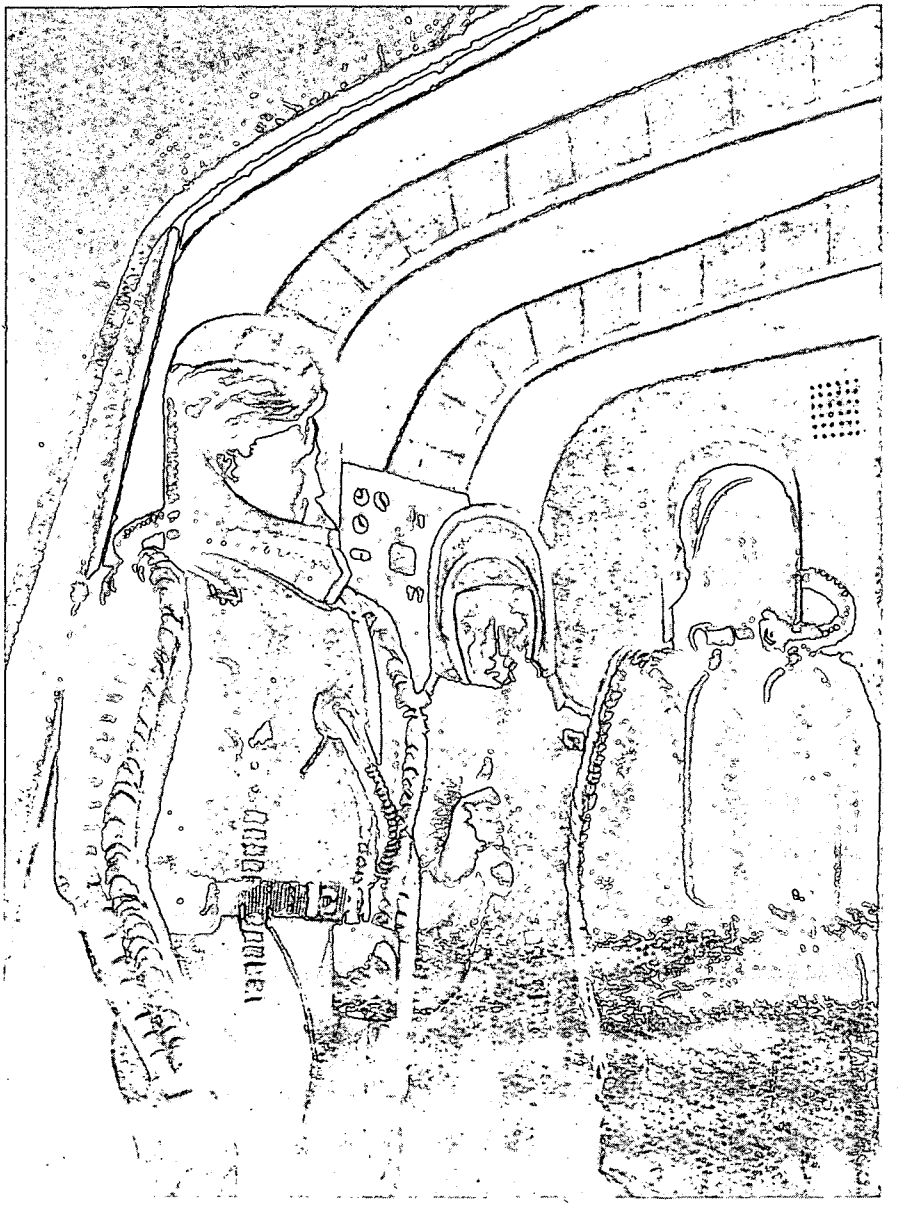

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child with a very pretty girl-child — but Dobyns wearied of the whole thing.

Terza sensed his rejection of her. Quick as a sensitive animal, she became angry and petulant. "You didn't have to come out with me!"

"I wanted to," he said, "but now I'm tired and want to go home."

"You treat me like a child. All right, play with me. Or you treat me like a woman. All right, be a gentleman. But don't seesaw all the time yourself. I just got to be a little bit happy and you have to get middle-aged and condescending. I won't take it."

"Your father—" he said, realizing the moment he said it that it was a mistake.

"My father this, my father that. If you're thinking about marrying me, do it yourself." She glared at him, stuck her tongue out, ran over a dune, and disappeared.

Dobyns Bennett was baffled. He did not know what to do. She was safe enough. The loudies never hurt anyone. He decided to teach her a lesson and to go on back himself, letting her find her way home when she pleased. The Area Search Team could find her easily if she really got lost.

He walked back to the gate.

When he saw the gates locked and the emergency lights on, he realized that he had made the worst mistake of his life.

HIS heart sinking within him, he ran the last few meters of the way, and beat the ceramic gate with his bare hands until it opened only just enough to let him in.

"What's wrong?" he asked the doortender.

The doortender muttered something which Dobyns could not understand.

"Speak up, man!" shouted Dobyns. "What's wrong?"

"The Goonhogo is coming back and they're taking over."

"That's impossible," said Dobyns. "They couldn't—" He checked himself. *Could* they?

"The Goonhogo's taken over," the gatekeeper insisted. "They've been given the whole thing. The Earth Authority has voted it to them. The Waywonjong has decided to send people right away. They're sending them."

"What do the Chinesians want with Venus? You can't kill a loudie without contaminating a thousand acres of land. You can't push them away without them drifting back. You can't scoop them up. Nobody can live here until we solve the problem of these things. We're a long way from having solved it," said Dobyns in angry bewilderment.

The gatekeeper shook his head. "Don't ask me. That's all I hear on the radio. Everybody else is excited too."

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Within an hour, the rain of people began.

Dobyns went up to the radar room, saw the skies above. The radar man himself was drumming his fingers against the desk. He said, "Nothing like this has been seen for a thousand years or more. You know what there is up there? Those are warships, the warships left over from the last of the old dirty wars. I knew the Chinesians were inside them. Everybody knew about it. It was sort of like a museum. Now they don't have any weapons in them. But do you know — there are millions of people hanging up there over Venus and I don't know what they are going to do!"

He stopped and pointed at one of the screens. "Look, you can see them running in patches. They're behind each other, so they cluster up solid. We've never had a screen look like that."

Dobyns looked at the screen. It was, as the operator said, full of blips.

As they watched, one of the men exclaimed, "What's that milky stuff down there in the lower left? See, it's — it's pouring," he said, "it's pouring somehow out of those dots. How can you pour things into a radar? It doesn't really show, does it?"

The radar man looked at his screen. He said, "Search me. I don't know what it is, either. You'll have to find out. Let's just see what happens."

Scanner Vomact came into the the room. He said, once he had taken a quick, experienced glance at the screens, "This may be the strangest thing we'll ever see, but I have a feeling they're dropping people. Lots of them. Dropping them by the thousands, or by the hundreds of thousands, or even by the millions. But people are coming down there. Come along with me, you two. We'll go out and see it. There may be somebody that we can help."

BY this time, Dobyns' conscience was hurting him badly. He wanted to tell Vomact that he had left Terza out there, but he had hesitated — not only because he was ashamed of leaving her, but because he did not want to tattle on the child to her father. Now he spoke.

"Your daughter's still outside."

Vomact turned on him solemnly. The immense eyes looked very tranquil and very threatening, but the silky voice was controlled.

"You may find her." The scanner added, in a tone which sent the thrill of menace up Dobyns' back, "And everything will be well if you bring her back."

Dobyns nodded as though receiving an order.

"I shall," said Vomact, "go out myself, to see what I can do, but I

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leave the finding of my daughter to you."

They went down, put on the extra-long-period converters, carried their miniaturized survey equipment so that they could find their way back through the fog, and went out. Just as they were at the gate, the gatekeeper said, "Wait a moment, sir and excellency. I have a message for you here on the phone. Please call Control."

Scanner Vomact was not to be called lightly and he knew it. He picked up the connection unit and spoke harshly.

The radar man came on the phone screen in the gatekeeper's wall. "They're overhead now, sir."

"Who's overhead?"

"The Chinesians are. They're coming down. I don't know how many there are. There must be two thousand warships over our heads right here and there are more thousands over the rest of Venus. They're down now. If you want to see them hit ground, you'd better get outside quick."

Vomact and Dobyns went out.

Down came the Chinesians. People's bodies were raining right out of the milk-cloudy sky. Thousands upon thousands of them with plastic parachutes that looked like bubbles. Down they came.

Dobyns and Vomact saw a headless man drift down. The parachute cords had decapitated him.

A woman fell near them. The drop had torn her breathing tube loose from her crudely bandaged throat and she was choking in her own blood. She staggered toward them, tried to babble but only drooled blood with mute choking sounds, and then fell face forward into the mud.

Two babies dropped. The adult accompanying them had been blown off course. Vomact ran, picked them up and handed them to a Chinesian man who had just landed. The man looked at the babies in his arms, sent Vomact a look of contemptuous inquiry, put the weeping children down in the cold slush of Venus, gave them a last impersonal glance and ran off on some mysterious errand of his own.

Vomact kept Bennett from picking up the children. "Come on, let's keep looking. We can't take care of all of them."

THE world had known that the Chinesians had a lot of unpredictable public habits, but they never suspected that the nondies and the needies and the showhices could pour down out of a poisoned sky. Only the Goonhogo itself would make such a reckless use of human life. *Nondies* were men and *needies* were women and *showhices* were the little children. And the *Goonhogo* was a name left over from the old days of

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nations. It meant something like republic or state or government. Whatever it was, it was the organization that ran the Chinesians in the Chinesian manner, under the Earth Authority.

And the ruler of the Goonhogo was the Waywonjong.

The Waywonjong didn't come to Venus. He just sent his people. He sent them floating down into Venus, to tackle the Venusian ecology with the only weapons which could make a settlement of that planet possible—people themselves. Human arms could tackle the loudies, the loudies who had been called "old ones" by the first Chinesian scouts to cover Venus.

The loudies had to be gathered together so gently that they would not die and, in dying, each contaminate a thousand acres. They had to be kept together by human bodies and arms in a gigantic living corral.

Scanner Vomact rushed forward.

A wounded Chinesian man hit the ground and his parachute collapsed behind him. He was clad in a pair of shorts, had a knife at his belt, canteen at his waist. He had an air converter attached next to his ear, with a tube running into his throat. He shouted something unintelligible at them and limped rapidly away.

People kept on hitting the ground all around Vomact and Dobyns.

The self-disposing parachutes were bursting like bubbles in the misty air, a moment or two after they touched the ground. Someone had done a tricky, efficient job with the chemical consequences of static electricity.

And as the two watched, the air was heavy with people. One time, Vomact was knocked down by a person. He found that it was two Chinesian children tied together.

Dobyns asked, "What are you doing? Where are you going? Do you have any leaders?"

He got cries and shouts in an unintelligible language. Here and there someone shouted in English "This way!" or "Leave us alone!" or "Keep going . . ." but that was all.

The experiment worked.

Eighty-two million people were dropped in that one day.

AFTER four hours which seemed barely short of endless, Dobyns found Terza in a corner of the cold hell. Though Venus was warm, the suffering of the almost-naked Chinesians had chilled his blood.

Terza ran toward him.

She could not speak.

She put her head on his chest and sobbed. Finally she managed to say, "I've — I've — I've tried to help, but they're too many, too many, too many!" And the sentence ended as shrill as a scream.

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Dobyns led her back to the experimental area.

They did not have to talk. Her whole body told him that she wanted his love and the comfort of his presence, and that she had chosen that course of life which would keep them together.

As they left the drop area, which seemed to cover all of Venus so far as they could tell, a pattern was beginning to form. The Chinesians were beginning to round up the loudies.

Terza kissed him mutely after the gatekeeper had let them through. She did not need to speak. Then she fled to her room.

The next day, the people from Experimental Area A tried to see if they could go out and lend a hand to the settlers. It wasn't possible to lend a hand; there were too many settlers. People by the millions were scattered all over the hills and valleys of Venus, sludging through the mud and water with their human toes, crushing the alien mud, crushing the strange plants. They didn't know what to eat. They didn't know where to go. They had no leaders.

All they had were orders to gather the loudies together in large herds and hold them there with human arms.

The loudies didn't resist.

After a time-lapse of several Earth days, the Goonhogo sent small scout cars. They brought a very different kind of Chinesian — these late arrivals were uniformed, educated, cruel, smug men. They knew what they were doing. And they were willing to pay any sacrifice of their own people to get it done.

They brought instructions. They put the people together in gangs. It did not matter where the nondies and needies had come from on Earth; it didn't matter whether they found their own showhices or somebody else's. They were shown the jobs to do and they got to work. Human bodies accomplished what machines could not have done — they kept the loudies firmly but gently encircled until every last one of the creatures was starved into nothingness.

Rice fields began to appear miraculously.

Scanner Vomact couldn't believe it. The Goonhogo biochemists had managed to adapt rice to the soil of Venus. And yet the seedlings came out of boxes in the scout cars and weeping people walked over the bodies of their own dead to keep the crop moving toward the planting.

Venusian bacteria could not kill human beings, nor could they dispose of human bodies after death. A problem arose and was solved. Immense sleds carried dead men, women and children — those who had fallen wrong, or drowned as they fell, or had been trampled by

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others — to an undisclosed destination. Dobyns suspected the material was to be used to add Earth-type organic waste to the soil of Venus, but he did not tell Terza.

The work went on.

The nondies and needies kept working in shifts. When they could not see in the darkness, they proceeded without seeing — keeping in line by touch or by shout. Foremen, newly trained, screeched commands. Workers lined up, touching fingertips. The job of building the fields kept on.

"THAT'S a big story," said the old man, "eighty-two million people dropped in a single day. And later I heard that the Waywonjong said it wouldn't have mattered if seventy million of them had died. Twelve million survivors would have been enough to make a spacehead for the Goonhogo. The Chinesians got Venus, all of it.

"But I'll never forget the nondies and the needies and the showhices falling out of the sky, men and women and children with their poor scared Chinesian faces. That funny Venusian air made them look green instead of tan. There they were, falling all around.

"You know something, young man?" said Dobyns Bennett approaching his fifth century of age.

"What?" said the reporter.

"There won't be things like that happening on any world again. Because now, after all, there isn't any separate Goonhogo left. There's only one Instrumentality and they don't care what a man's race may have been in the ancient years. Those were the rough old days, the ones I lived in. Those were the days *men* still tried to do things."

Dobyns almost seemed to doze off, but he roused himself sharply and said, "I tell you, the sky was full of people. They fell like water. They fell like rain. I've seen the awful ants in Africa, and there's not a thing among the stars to beat them for prowling horror. Mind you, they're worse than anything the stars contain. I've seen the crazy worlds near Alpha Centauri, but I never saw anything like the time the people fell on Venus. More than eighty-two million in one day and my own little Terza lost among them.

"But the rice did sprout. And the loudies died as the walls of people held them in with human arms. Walls of people, I tell you, with volunteers jumping in to take the places of the falling ones.

"They were people still, even when they shouted in the darkness. They tried to help each other even while they fought a fight that had to be fought without violence. They were people still. And they did so win. It was crazy and impossible, but they won. Mere hu-

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man beings did what machines and science would have taken another thousand years to do . . .

"The funniest thing of all was the first house that I saw a nondie put up, there in the rain of Venus. I was out there with Vomact and with a pale sad Terza. It wasn't much of a house, shaped out of twisted Venusian wood. There it was. *He* built it, the smiling half-naked Chinesian nondie. We went to the door and said to him in English, 'What are you building here, a shelter or a hospital?'

"The Chinesian grinned at us. 'No,' he said, 'gambling.'

"Vomact wouldn't believe it: 'Gambling?'

"'Sure,' said the nondie. 'Gambling is the first thing a man needs in a strange place. It can take the worry out of his soul."

"Is that all?" said the reporter.

DOBYNS Bennett muttered that the personal part did not count. He added, "Some of my great-great-great-great-great-grandsons may come along. You count those greats. Their faces will show you easily enough that I married into the Vomact line. Terza saw what happened. She saw how people build worlds. This was the hard way to build them. She never forgot the night with the dead Chinesian babies lying in the half-illuminated mud, or the parachute ropes dissolving slowly. She heard the needies weeping and the helpless nondies comforting them and leading them off to nowhere. She remembered the cruel, neat officers coming out of the scout cars. She got home and saw the rice come up, and saw how the Goonhogo made Venus a Chinesian place."

"What happened to you personally?" asked the reporter.

"Nothing much. There wasn't any more work for us, so we closed down Experimental Area A. I married Terza.

"Any time later, when I said to her, 'You're not such a bad girl!' she was able to admit the truth and tell me she was not. That night in the rain of people would test anybody's soul and it tested hers. She had met a big test and passed it. She used to say to me, 'I saw it once. I saw the people fell, and I never want to see another person suffer again. Keep me with you, Dobyns, keep me with you forever.'

"And," said Dobyns Bennet, "it wasn't forever, but it was a happy and sweet three hundred years. She died after our fourth diamond anniversary. Wasn't that a wonderful thing, young man?"

The reporter said it was. And yet, when he took the story back to his editor, he was told to put it into the archives. It wasn't the right kind of story for entertainment and the public would not appreciate it any more.

—CORDWAINER SMITH

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MISSING SOMETHING?

TWICE IN TIME

By Manly Wade Wellman

Ironic destiny of a visitor from the future trying to take advantage of things to come.

ADDRESS CENTAURI

By F. L. Wallace

Earth was too perfect for these extraordinary exiles — to belong to it, they had to flee it.

MISSION OF GRAVITY

By Hal Clement

All the science on earth might not be able to meet the demands of this alien race.

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The Man

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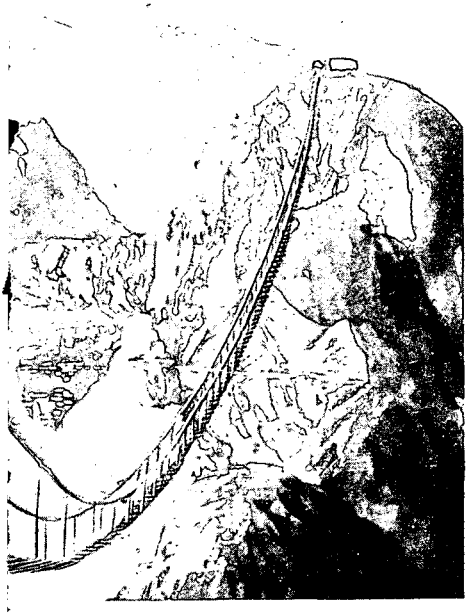
in the Mailbag

BY GORDON R. DICKSON

Traveling inside an official pouch gave Tardy no immunity whatever, diplomatic or otherwise — his destination was the dead-letter office!

Illustrated by WOOD



THE Right Honorable Joshua Guy, Ambassador Plenipotentiary to Dilbia, was smoking tobacco in a pipe. The fumes from it made John Tardy cough and strangle — or, at least, so it seemed.

"Sir?" wheezed John Tardy.

"Sorry," said Joshua, knocking the pipe out in an ashtray where the coals continued to smolder only slightly less villainously than before. "Thought you heard me the first time. I said that naturally as soon as we knew you were being assigned to the job, we let out word that you were deeply attached to the girl."

"To—" John gulped air. Both men were talking Dilbian, to exercise the command of the language John had had hypnoed into him

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on his way here from the Belt Stars, and the Dilbian nickname for the missing Earthian female sociologist came from his lips automatically — "this Greasy Face?"

"Miss Ty Lamorc," nodded Joshua, smoothly slipping into Basic and then out again. "Greasy Face, if you prefer. By the by, you mustn't go taking all these Dilbian names at face value. The two old gentlemen you're going to meet — Daddy Shaking Knees and Two Answers — aren't what they might sound like. Daddy Shaking Knees got his name from holding up one end of a timber one day in an emergency — after about forty-five minutes, someone noticed his knees beginning to tremble. And Two Answers is a tribute to the Dilbian who can come up with more than one answer to a problem."

ABOUT to ask Joshua about his own Dilbian nickname of Little Bite, John Tardy shifted to safer ground. "What about this Schlaff fellow who—"

"Heiner Schlaff," interrupted Joshua Guy, frowning, "made a mistake. You'd think anyone would know better than to lose his head when a Dilbian picks him up. After the first time one picked up Heinie, he wasn't able to step out onto the street without some Dilbian lifting him up to hear him yell for help. The Squeaking Squirt, they called him — very bad for Earth-Dilbian relations." He looked severely at John. "I don't expect anything like that from you." The ambassador's eye seemed to weigh John's chunky body and red hair.

"No, no," said John hastily.

"Decathalon winner in the Olympics four years back, weren't you?"

"Yes," said John. "But what I really want is to get on an Exploration team to one of the new planets. I'm a fully qualified biochemist and —"

"I read your file. Well," Joshua Guy said, "do a good job here and who knows?" He glanced out the window beside him at the sprawling log buildings of the local Dilbian town of Humrog, framed against the native conifers and the mountain peaks beyond. "But it's your physical condition that'll count. You understand *why* you have to go it alone, don't you?"

"They told me back on Earth. But if you can add anything—"

"Headquarters never understands the fine points of these situations," said Joshua, almost cheerfully. "To put it tersely — we want to make friends with these Dilbians. They're the race nearest to ours in intelligence that we've run across so far. They'd make fine partners. Unfortunately we don't seem to be able to impress them very much."

"Size?" asked John Tardy.

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"Well, yes — size is probably the biggest stumbling block. The fact that we're about lap-dog proportions in relation to them. But it shows up even more sharply in a cultural dissimilarity. They don't give a hang for our mechanical gimmicks and they're all for personal honor and a healthy outdoors life." He looked at John. "You'll say, of course, why not a show of force?"

"I should think—" began John.

"But we don't want to fight them — we want to make friends with them. Let me give you an Earth-type analogy. For centuries, humans have been able to more or less tame most of the smaller wild animals. The large ones, however, being unused to knuckling under to anyone—"

Beep! signaled the annunciator on Joshua's desk.

"Ah, they're here now." Joshua Guy rose. "We'll go into the reception room. Now remember that Boy-Is-She-Built is old Shaking Knees' daughter. It was the fact that the Streamside Terror wanted her that caused all this ruckus and ended up with the Terror's kidnapping Ty Lamorc."

HE led the way through the door into the next room. John Tardy followed, his head, in spite of the hypno training, still spinning a little with the odd Dilbian names — in particular Boy-Is-She-Built, the Basic translation of which was only a pale shadow of its Dilbian original. While not by any means a shy person, John rather hesitated to look a father in the eye and refer to the female child of his old age as — further reflections were cut short as he entered the room.

"Ah, there, Little Bite!" boomed the larger of the two black-furred monsters awaiting them. The one who spoke stood well over two and a half meters in height — at least eight feet tall. "This the new one? Two Answers and I came right over to meet him. Kind of bright-colored on top, isn't he?"

John Tardy blinked. But Joshua Guy answered equably enough.

"Some of us have that color hair back home," he said. "This is John Tardy—John, meet Shaking Knees. And the quiet one is Two Answers."

"Quiet!" roared the other Dilbian, bursting into gargantuan roars of laughter. "Me *quiet!* That's good!" He bellowed his merriment.

John stared. In spite of the hypno training, he could not help comparing these two to a couple of very large bears who had stood up on their hind legs and gone on a diet. They were leaner than bears — though leanness is relative when you weigh upward of a thousand pounds — and longer-legged. Their noses were more pug,

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their lower jaws more humanlike than ursinoid in the way of chin. But their complete coat of thick black hair and their bearishness of language and actions made the comparison almost inevitable — though in fact their true biological resemblance was closer to the humans themselves.

"Haven't laughed like that since old Souse Nose fell in the beer vat!" snorted Two Answers, gradually getting himself under control. "All right, Bright Top, what've you got to say for yourself? Think you can take the Streamside Terror with one hand tied behind your back?"

"I'm here," said John Tardy, "to bring back — er — Greasy Face, and—"

"Streamside won't just hand her over. Will he, Knees?" Two Answers jogged his companion with a massively humorous elbow.

"Not that boy!" Shaking Knees shook his head. "Little Bite, I ought never have let you talk me out of a son-in-law like that. Tough? Rough? Tricky? My little girl'd do all right with a buck like that."

"I merely," demurred Joshua, "suggested you make them wait a bit. Boy-Is-She-Built is still rather young—"

"And, boy, is she built!" said Shaking Knees in a tone of fond, fatherly pride. "Still, it's hard to see how she could do much better." He peered suddenly at Joshua. "You wouldn't have something hidden between your paws on this?"

JOSHUA Guy spread his hands in a wounded manner. "Would I risk one of my own people? Maybe two? All to start something that would make the Terror mad enough to steal Greasy to pay me back?"

"Guess not," admitted Shaking Knees. "But you Shorties are shrewd little characters." His words rang with honest admiration.

"Thanks. The same to you," said Joshua. "Now about the Terror—"

"He headed west through the Cold Mountains," replied Two Answers. "He was spotted yesterday a half-day's hike north, pointed toward Sour Ford and the Hollows. He probably nighted at Brittle Rock Inn there."

"Good," said Joshua. "We'll have to find a guide for my friend here."

"Guide? Ho!" chortled Shaking Knees. Wait'll you see what *we* got for you." He shouldered past Two Answers, opened the door and bellowed, "Bluffer! Come on in!"

There was a moment's pause, and then a Dilbian even leaner and taller than Shaking Knees shoved his way into the room, which, with this new Dilbian ad-

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dition, became decidedly crowded.

"There you are," said Shaking Knees, waving a prideful paw. "What more could you want? Walk all day, climb all night, and start out fresh next morning after breakfast. Little Bite, meet the Hill Bluffer!"

"That's me!" boomed the newcomer, rattling the walls. "Anything on two feet walk away from me? Not over solid ground or living rock! When I look at a hill, it knows it's beat, and it lays out flat for my trampling feet!"

"Very good," said Joshua dryly. "But I don't know about my friend here keeping up if you can travel like that."

"Keep up? Hah!" guffawed Shaking Knees. "No, no, Little Bite — don't you recognize the Bluffer here? He's the postman. We're going to mail this half-pint friend of yours to the Terror. Only way. Cost you five kilos of nails."

"Nobody stops the mail," put in the Hill Bluffer.

"Hmm," said Joshua. He glanced at John Tardy. "Not a bad suggestion. The only thing is how you plan to carry him —"

"Who? Him?" boomed the Bluffer, focusing on John. "Why, I'll handle him like he was a week-old pup. I'll wrap him in some real soft straw and tuck him in the bottom of my mailbag and—"

"Hold it," interrupted Joshua. "That's just what I was afraid of. If you're going to carry him, you'll have to do it humanely."

"I WON'T wear it!" the Hill Bluffer was still roaring, two hours later. The cause of his upset, a system of straps and pads arranged into a rough saddlebag that would ride between his shoulders and bear John, lay on the crushed rock of Humrog's main street. A few Dilbian bystanders had gathered to watch and their bass-voiced comments were not of the sort to bring the Hill Bluffer to a more reasonable frame of mind.

"Listen, you tad!" Shaking Knees was beginning to get a little hot under the neck-fur himself. "This is your mother's uncle's first cousin speaking. You want me to speak to the great-grandfathers of your clan—"

"Arright — arright — arright!" snarled the Hill Bluffer. "Buckle me up in the obscenity thing!"

"That's better!" growled Shaking Knees, simmering down as John Tardy and Joshua Guy went to work to put the saddle on. "Not that I blame you, but—"

"Don't feel so bad at that," said the Hill Bluffer sulkily, wriggling his shoulders under the straps in experimental fashion.

"You'll find it," grunted Joshua, tugging on a strap, "easier to carry than your regular bag."

"That's not the point," groused

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the Hill Bluffer. "A postman's got dignity. He just don't wear—" He exploded suddenly at a snickering onlooker. *"What's so funny, you? Want to make something out of it? Just say the—"*

"I'll take care of him!" roared Shaking Knees, rolling forward. "What's wrong with you, Split Nose?"

The Dilbian addressed as Split Nose swallowed his grin rather hastily as the Humrog village chief took a hand in the conversation.

"Just passing by," he growled defensively, backing out of the crowd.

"Well, just pass on, friend, pass on!" boomed Shaking Knees. He was rewarded by a hearty laugh from the crowd, and Split Nose rolled off down the street with every indication his hairy ears were burning.

John had taken advantage of this little by-play to mount into the saddlebag. The Hill Bluffer grunted in surprise and looked back at him.

"You're light enough," he said. "How is it? All right back there?"

"Feels fine," said John, unsuspecting.

"Then so long, everybody!" boomed the Hill Bluffer, and, without further warning, barreled off down the main street in the direction of the North Trail, the Cold Mountains and the elusive but dangerous Streamside Terror.

HAD it not been for the hypno training, John Tardy would not have been able to recognize this fast and unexpected start for the Dilbian trick it was. He realized instantly, however, that the Hill Bluffer, having lost his enthusiasm for the job at first sight of the harness which was to carry John, was attempting a little strategy to get out of it. Outright refusal to carry John was out of the question, but if John should object to the unceremoniousness of his departure, the Bluffer would be perfectly justified — by Dilbian standards — if he threw up his hands and refused to deliver a piece of mail that insisted on imposing conditions on him. John shut his mouth and hung on.

All the same, it was awkward. John had intended to work out a plan of action with Joshua Guy before he left. Well, there was always the wrist-phone. He would call Joshua at the first convenient opportunity.

Meanwhile, it was developing that the Hill Bluffer had not exaggerated his ability to cover ground. One moment they were on the main street of Humrog, and the next upon a mountain trail, green pinelike branches whipping by as John Tardy plunged and swayed to the Hill Bluffer's motion like a man on the back of an elephant. It was no time for abstract thought. John clung to the straps before

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him, meditating rather bitterly on that natural talent of his for athletics which had got him into this, when by all rights he should be on an exploration team on one of the frontier planets right now. He was perfectly qualified, but just because of that decathalon win....

He continued to nurse his grievances for something better than an hour, when he was suddenly interrupted by the Hill Bluffer's grunting and slowing down. Peering forward over the postman's shoulder, John discovered another Dilbian who had just stepped out of the woods before them. The newcomer was on the shaggy side. He carried an enormous triangular-headed axe and had some native herbivore roughly the size and shape of a musk-ox slung casually over one shoulder.

"Hello, woodsman," said the Hill Bluffer, halting.

"Hello, postman." The other displayed a gap-toothed array of fangs in a grin. "Got some mail for me?"

"You!" the Hill Bluffer snorted.

"Not so funny. I could get mail," growled the other. He peered around at John. "So that's the Half Pint Posted."

"Oh?" said the Hill Bluffer. "Who told you?"

"The Cobbly Queen, that's who!" retorted the other, curling the right side of his upper lip in the native equivalent of a wink. John Tardy, recalling the Cobblies were the Dilbian equivalent of fairies, brownies, or what-have-you, peered at the woodsman to see if he was serious. John decided he wasn't. Which still left the problem of how he had recognized John.

REMEMBERING the best Dilbian manners were made of sheer brass, John Tardy horned in on the conversation.

"Who're you?" he demanded of the woodsman.

"So it talks, does it?" The woodsman grinned. "They call me Tree Weeper, Half Pint. Because I chop them down, you see."

"Who told you about me?"

"Oh, that'd be telling," grinned Tree-Weeper. "Say, you know why they call him the Streamside Terror, Half Pint? It's on account of he likes to fight alongside a stream, pull the other feller in and drown him."

"I know," said John shortly.

"Do you now?" said the other. "Well, it ought to be something to watch. Good going to you, Half Pint, and you too, postman. Me for home."

He turned away into the brush alongside the trail and it swallowed him up. The Hill Bluffer took up his route again without a word.

"Friend of yours?" inquired John, when it became apparent

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the Hill Bluffer was not going to comment on the meeting.

"Friend?" the Hill Bluffer snorted angrily. "*I'm* a public official!"

"I just thought—" said John. "He seemed to know things."

"That hill hopper! Somebody ahead of us told him!" growled the Bluffer. But he fell unaccountably silent after that and said no more for the next three hours, until — the two of them having left Humrog a couple of hours past noon — they pulled up in the waning sunlight before the roadside inn at Brittle Rock, where they would spend the night.

The first thing John Tardy did, after working some life back into his legs, was to stroll off to the limits of the narrow, rocky ledge on which the Inn stood — Brittle Rock was hardly more than a wide spot in the narrow mountain gorge up which their road ran — and put in a call to Joshua Guy with the phone on his wrist. As soon as Joshua got on the beam, John relievedly explained the reason behind his call. It did not go over, apparently, very well.

"Instructions?" floated the faintly astonished voice of the ambassador out of the receiver. "What instructions?"

"The ones you were going to give me. Before I took off so suddenly—"

"But there's absolutely nothing I can tell you," interrupted Joshua. "You've had your hypno training. It's up to you. Find the Terror and get the girl back. You'll have to figure out your own means, my dear fellow."

"But—" John stopped, staring helpless at the phone.

"Well, good luck, then. Call me tomorrow. Call me anytime."

"Thanks," said John.

"Not at all. Luck. Good-by."

"Good-by."

JOHN Tardy clicked off the phone and walked somberly back to the Inn. Inside its big front door, he found a wide common room filled with tables and benches. The Hill Bluffer, to the amusement of a host of other travelers, was arguing with a female Dilbian wearing an apron.

"How the unmentionable should *I* know what to feed him?" the Hill Bluffer was bellowing. "Give him some meat, some beer — anything!"

"But you haven't had the children dragging in pets like I have. Feed one the wrong thing and it dies. And then they cry their little hearts—"

"Talking about me?" John Tardy broke in.

"Oh!" gasped the female, glancing down and retreating half a step. "It talks!"

"Didn't I say he did?" demanded the Bluffer. "Half Pint,

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what kind of stuff do you eat?"

John fingered the four-inch tubes of food concentrate at his waist. Dilbian food would not poison him, though he could expect little nourishment from it, and a fair chance of an allergic reaction from certain fruits and vegetables. Bulk was all he needed to supplement the concentrates.

"Just give me a little beer," he said.

The room buzzed approval. This little critter, they seemed to feel, could not be too alien if he liked to drink. The female brought him a wastebasket-sized wooden mug that had no handles and smelled like the most decayed of back-lot breweries. John took a cautious sip and held the bitter, sour, flat-tasting liquid in his mouth for an indecisive moment.

He swallowed manfully. The assembled company gave vent to rough-voiced approval, then abruptly turned their attention elsewhere. Looking around, he saw that the Hill Bluffer had gone off somewhere. John climbed up on a nearby bench and got to work on his food concentrates.

After finishing these, he continued to sit where he was for the better part of an hour, but the Hill Bluffer did not return. Struck by a sudden thought, John Tardy climbed down and went back toward the kitchen of the Inn. Pushing his way through a hide curtain, he found himself in it — a long room with a stone fire-trough down the center, carcasses hanging from overhead beams, and a dozen or so Dilbians of both sexes equally immersed in argument and the preparation of food and drink. Among them was the female who had brought John the beer.

He stepped into her path as she headed for the front room with a double handful of full mugs.

"Eeeeek!" she exclaimed, or the Dilbian equivalent, stopping so hastily she spilled some of the beer. "There's a good little Shorty," she said in a quavering, coaxing tone. "Good Shorty. Go back now."

"Was the Terror really here last night?" John asked.

"He stopped to pick up some meat and beer, but I didn't see him," she said. "I've no time for hill-and-alley brawlers. Now shoo!"

John Tardy shooed.

AS he was heading back to his bench, however, he felt himself scooped up from behind. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw he was being carried by a large male Dilbian with a pouch hanging from one shoulder. This individual carried him to a table where three other Dilbians sat and dropped him on it. John Tardy instinctively got to his feet.

"There he be," said the one who had picked him up. "A genuine Shorty."

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"Give him some beer," suggested one with a scar on his face, who was seated at the table.

They did. John prudently drank some.

"Don't hold much," commented one of the others at the table, examining the mug John had set down after what had been actually a very healthy draft for a human. "I wonder if he—"

"Couldn't. Not at that size," replied the one with the pouch. "He's chasing that female Shorty, though. You reckon—?"

Scarface regretted that they did not have the Shorty female there at the moment. Her presence, in his opinion, would have provided the opportunity for interesting and educative experimentation.

"Go to hell!" said John in Basic. He then made the most forceful translation he could manage in Dilbian.

"Tough character!" said the pouched one, and they all laughed. "Better not get tough with me, though."

He made a few humorous swipes at John's red head that would have split it on contact. They laughed again.

"I wonder," said Scarface, "can he do tricks?"

"Sure," John answered promptly. He hefted his still-full mug of beer. "Watch. I take a firm grip, rock back, and—" He spun suddenly on one heel, sloshing a wave of beer into their staring faces. Then he was off the table and dodging among Dilbian and table legs toward the front entrance. The rest of the guests, roaring with laughter, made no attempt to halt him. He ducked into the outer darkness.

Fumbling in the gloom, he made his way around the side of the Inn and dropped down on a broken keg he found there. He was just making up his mind to stay there until the Hill Bluffer came and found him, when the back kitchen door opened and closed very softly, off to his left.

He slipped off the keg into deeper shadow. He had caught just a glimpse out of the corner of his eye, but he had received the impression of a Dilbian female in the doorway. There was no sound now.

He began to creep backward. Dilbia's one moon was not showing over these latitudes at this season of the year, and the starlight gave only a faint illumination. He stumbled suddenly over the edge of an unseen slope and froze, remembering the cliff edge overhanging the gorge below.

A faint reek of the Dilbian odor came to his nostrils — and a sound of sniffing. Dilbians were no better than humans when it came to a sense of smell, but each had a perceptible odor to the nostrils of the other — an odor partly depend-

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ent on diet, partly on a differing physiological makeup. The odor John Tardy smelled was part-piny, part-musk.

The sniffing ceased. John held his breath, waiting for it to start again. The pressure built up in his chest, and finally he was forced to exhale. He turned his head slowly from side to side.

Silence.

Only the inner creak of his tense neck muscles turning. There! Was that something? John began to creep back along the edge beside him.

There was a sudden rush, a rearing up of some huge dark shape in the darkness before him. He dodged, felt himself slipping on the edge, and something smashed like a falling wall against the side of his head, and he went whirling down and away into star-shot darkness.

HE opened his eyes to bright sunlight.

The sun, just above the mountain peaks, was shining right in his eyes. He blinked and started to roll over, out of its glare, into—

— And grabbed in a sudden cold sweat for the stubby trunk of a dwarf tree growing right out of the cliffside.

For a second then, he hung there, sweating and looking down. He lay on a narrow ledge and the gorge was deep below. How deep, he did not stop to figure. It was deep enough.

He twisted around and looked up the distance of a couple of meters to the ledge on which the Inn was built. It was not far. He could climb it. After a little while, with his heart in his throat, John Tardy did.

When he came back around the front of the Inn, in the morning sunlight, it was to find the Bluffer orating at a sort of open-air meeting, with the four who had harried John standing hangdog between two axemen and before an elderly Dilbian judgelike on a bench.

"—the mail!" the Hill Bluffer was roaring. "The mail is sacred! Anyone daring to lay fist upon the mail in transit—"

John, tottering forward, put an end to the trial in progress.

Later on, after washing his slight scalp-wound and having taken on some more food concentrates and flat beer for breakfast, John Tardy climbed back up on the Bluffer's back and they were under way once more. Their route today led from Brittle Rock through the mountains to Sour Ford and the Hollows. The Hollows, John had learned, was clan-country for the Terror, and their hope was to catch him before he reached it. The trail now led across swinging rope suspension bridges and along narrow cuts in the rock — all of

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which the Hill Bluffer took not only with the ease of one well accustomed to them, but with the abstraction of one lost in deep thought.

"Hey!" said John, at last.

"Huh? What?" grunted the Hill Bluffer, coming to suddenly.

"Tell me something," said John, reaching out for anything to keep his carrier awake. "How'd the ambassador get the name Little Bite?"

"You don't know that?" exclaimed the Hill Bluffer. "I thought you Shorties all knew. Well, it was old Hammertoes down at Humrog."

The Bluffer chuckled. "Got drunk and all worked up about Shorties. 'Gimme the good old days,' he said, and went down to just make an example of Little Bite – Shorty One, we called him then. He pushes the door open far as it'll go, but Little Bite's got it fixed to only open part way. So there's Hammertoes, with only one arm through the door, feeling around and hollering, 'All right, Shorty! You can't get away! I'll get you—' when Little Bite picks up something sharp and cuts him a couple times across the knuckles. Old Hammertoes yells bloody murder and yanks his hand back. Slam goes the door."

The Hill Bluffer chortled to himself. "Then old Hammertoes comes back uptown, sucking his knuckles. 'What happened?' says everybody. 'Nothing,' says Hammertoes. 'Something must've happened – look at your hand,' everybody says. 'I tell you nothing happened!' yells Hammertoes. 'He wouldn't let me in where I could grab hold of him, so I come away. And as for my hand, that's got nothing to do with it. He didn't hurt my hand hardly at all. He just give it a little bite!'"

The Hill Bluffer's laughter rolled like thunder between the mountain walls. "Old Hammertoes never did live that down. Every time since, whenever he goes to give somebody a hard time, they all tell him, 'Look out, Hammertoes, or I'm liable to give you a little bite!'"

JOHN Tardy found himself laughing. Possibly it was the time and place of the telling, possibly the story, but he could see the situation in his mind's eye and it was funny.

"You know," said the Bluffer over one furry shoulder when John stopped laughing, "you're not bad for a Shorty." He fell silent, appeared to wrestle with himself for a moment, then came to a stop and sat down in a convenient wide spot on the trail.

"Get off," he said. "Come around where I can talk to you."

John complied. He found himself facing the seated Dilbian, their

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heads about on a level. Behind the large, black-furred skull, a few white clouds floated in the high blue sky.

"You know," the Bluffer said, "the Streamside Terror's mug's been spilled."

"Spilled?" echoed John — then remembered this as a Dilbian phrase expressing loss of honor. "By me? He's never even seen me."

"By Little Bite," the Bluffer said. "But Little Bite's a Guest in Humrog and the North Country. The Terror couldn't call him to account personally for speaking against Shaking Knees giving the Terror Boy-Is-She-Built. He had to do something, though, so he took Greasy Face."

"Oh," said John.

"So you got to fight the Terror if you want Greasy back."

"Fight?" John blurted.

"Man's got his pride," said the Bluffer. "That's why I can't figure you out. I mean you aren't bad for a Shorty. You got guts — like with those drunks last night. But you fighting the Terror — I mean *hell!"* said the Bluffer, in deeply moved tones.

SILENTLY, John Tardy found himself in full agreement with the postman.

"So what're you going to do when you meet Streamside?"

"Well," said John, rather inadequately, "I don't exactly know—"

"Well," growled the Bluffer in his turn, "not my problem. Get on." John went around behind his furry back. "Oh, by the way, know who it was tried to pitch you over the cliff?"

"Who?" asked John.

"The Cobbly Queen — Boy-Is-She-Built!" translated the Bluffer as John looked blank. "She heard about you and got ahead of us somehow . . . ." The Bluffer's voice trailed off into a mutter. "If they're thinking of monkeying with the mail . . ."

John paid no attention. He had his own fish to fry, and very fishy indeed they smelled just at the moment. Swaying on top of the enormous back as they took off again, he found himself scowling over the situation. Headquarters had said nothing about his being expected to fight some monstrous free-style scrapper of an alien race — a sort of gargantuan Billy the Kid with a number of kills to his credit. Joshua Guy had not mentioned it. Just what was going on here, anyway?

Abruptly casting aside the security regulation that recommended a "discreet" use of the instrument, John lifted the wrist that bore his wrist-phone to his lips.

"Josh—" he began, and suddenly checked. A fine trickle of sweat ran coldly down his spine.

The phone was gone.

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HE had the rest of the morning to ponder this new development in the situation, and a good portion of the afternoon. He might have continued indefinitely if it had not been for a sudden interruption in their journey.

They had crossed a number of spidery suspension bridges during the course of the day, and now they had come to another one, somewhat longer than any met so far. If this had been the only difference, John might have been left to his thoughts. But this bridge was different.

Somebody had fixed it so they couldn't get across.

It happened that their end of the bridge had its anchors sunk in a rock face a little back and some seven or eight meters above their heads. All that had been done, simply enough, was to tighten the two main support cables at the far end. The sag of the span had straightened out, lifting the near end up above them, out of reach.

The Hill Bluffer bellowed obscenely across the gap. There was no response from the windlass on the far side, or the small hut beyond.

"What's happened?" John Tardy asked.

"I don't know," said the Bluffer, suddenly thoughtful. "It isn't supposed to be rucked up except at night, to keep people from sneaking over and not paying toll."

He reached as high as he could, but his fingertips fell far short.

"Lift me up," suggested John.

They tried it, but even upheld by the ankles, at the full stretch of the Bluffer's arms, John was rewarded only by a throat-squeezing view of the Knobby River below.

"It'll take five days to go around by Slide Pass," growled the Bluffer, putting John down.

John went over to examine the rock face. What he discovered about it did not make him happy, though perhaps it should have. It was climbable. Heart tucked in throat, he began to go up it.

"Hey! Where're you going?" bellowed the Hill Bluffer.

John did not answer. He needed his breath; anyway, his destination was obvious. The climb up the rock was not bad for someone who had had some mountain experience, but a reaction set in when he wrapped his arms around the rough six-inch cable. He inched his way upward and got on top, both arms and both legs wrapped around the cable, and began a worm-creep toward the bridge end, floating on nothingness at a rather remarkable distance — seen from this angle — ahead of him.

It occurred to him, after he had slowly covered about a third of the cable-distance in this fashion, that a real hero in a place like this should stand up and tightrope-

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walk to the bridge proper. This, in addition to impressing the Bluffer, would shorten the suspense considerably. John Tardy concluded he must be a conservative and went on crawling.

Eventually he reached the bridge, crawled out on it and lay panting for a while, then got up and crossed the gorge. At the far end, he knocked loose the lock on the windlass with a heavy rock, and the bridge banged down into position, raising a cloud of dust.

Through this same cloud of dust, the Hill Bluffer was shortly to be seen advancing with a look of grim purpose. He stalked past John and entered the hut — from which subsequently erupted thunderous crashes, thuds and roars.

John Tardy looked about for a place of safety. He had never seen two Dilbians fight, but it was only too apparent now what was going on inside.

He was still looking around, however, when the sound ceased abruptly and the Hill Bluffer emerged, dabbing at a torn ear.

"Old slaver-tongue," he growled. "*She* got at him."

"Who?" asked John.

"Boy Is-She-Built. Well, mount up, Half Pint. Oh, by the way, that was pretty good."

"Good? What was?"

"Climbing across the bridge that way. Took guts. Well, let's go."

John climbed back up into his saddlebag and thought heavily.

"You didn't kill him?" he asked, as they started out once more.

"Who? Old Winch Rope? Just knocked a little sense into him. Hell, there's got to be somebody work the bridge. Hang on now. It's all downhill from here and it'll be twilight before we hit the Ford."

IT was indeed twilight before they reached their stopping place at Sour Ford. John Tardy, who had been dozing, awoke with a jerk and sat up in his saddle, blinking.

In the fading light, they stood in a large, grassy clearing semi-circled by forest. Directly before them was a long low log building, and behind it a smooth-flowing river with its farther shore shrouded in tree shadow and the approaching dusk.

"Get down," said the Bluffer.

Stiffly, John Tardy descended, stamped about to restore his circulation, and followed the Bluffer's huge bulk through the hide-curtain of the doorway to the building's oil-lamplit interior.

John discovered a large room like that at the Brittle Rock Inn — but one that was cleaner, airier, and filled with travelers a good deal less noisy and drunken. Gazing around for the explanation behind this difference, John caught sight of a truly enormous Dilbian, grizzled with age and heavy with

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fat, seated like a patriarch in a huge chair behind a table at the room's far end.

John and the Bluffer found a table and set about eating. But as soon as they were through, the postman led John up to the patriarch.

"One Man," said the Bluffer in a respectful voice, "this here's the Half Pint Posted."

John Tardy blinked. Up close, One Man had turned out to be even more awe-inspiring than he had seemed from a distance. He overflowed the carved chair he sat in, and the graying fur on top of his head all but brushed against a polished staff of hardwood laid crosswise on pegs driven into the wall two meters above the floor. His massive forearms and great pawlike hands were laid out on the table before him like swollen clubs of bone and muscle. But his face was almost biblically serene.

"Sit down," he rumbled in a voice so deep it sounded like a great drum sounding far off somewhere in a woods. "I've wanted to see a Shorty. You're my Guest, Half Pint, for as long as you wish. Anyone tell you about me?"

"I'm sorry—" began John.

"Never mind." The enormous head nodded mildly. "They call me One Man, Half Pint, because I once held blood feud all by myself — being an orphan — with a whole clan. And won." He looked calmly at John. "What you might call an impossible undertaking."

"Some of them caught him on a trail once," put in the Hill Bluffer. "He killed all three."

"That was possible," murmured One Man. His eyes were still on John. "Tell me, Half Pint, what are you Shorties doing here, anyhow?"

"Well—" John blinked. "I'm looking for Greasy Face—"

"I mean the entire lot of you," One Man said. "There must be some plan behind it. Nobody asked you all here, you know."

"Well—" said John again, rather lamely, and proceeded to try an explanation. It did not seem to go over very well, a technological civilization being hard to picture with the Dilbian vocabulary.

ONE Man nodded when John Tardy was through. "I see. If that's the case, what makes you think we ought to like you Shorties?"

"Ought to?" said John, jolted into a reactive answer, for he did not have red hair for nothing. "You don't ought to! It's up to you."

One Man nodded. "Pass me my stick," he said.

One of the Dilbians standing around took down the staff from its pegs and passed it to him. He laid it on the table before him — a young post ten centimeters in

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thickness — grasping it with fists held over two meters apart.

"No one's ever been able to do this but me," he said.

Without lifting his fists from contact with the table, he rotated them to the outside. The staff sprang upward in the center like a bow, and snapped.

"Souvenir for you," said One Man, handing the pieces to John. "Good night."

He closed his eyes and sat as if dozing. The Bluffer tapped John on a shoulder and led him away, off to their sleeping quarters.

Once in the Inn dormitory, however, John found himself totally unable to sleep. He had passed from utter bone-weariness into a sort of feverish wide-awakedness, through which the little episode with One Man buzzed and circled like a persistently annoying fly.

What had been the point of all that talk and wood-breaking?

Suddenly and quietly, John sat up. Beside him, on his heap of soft branches, the Bluffer slept without stirring, as did the rest of the dormitory inhabitants. A single lamp burned high above, hanging from the rooftree. By its light, John got out and examined the broken pieces of wood. There was a little node or knot visible just at the point of breakage. A small thing, but—

John frowned. He seemed surrounded by mysteries. The more he thought of it, the more certain he was that One Man had been attempting to convey some message to him. What was it? For that matter, what was going on between humans and Dilbians, and what had his mission to rescue Greasy Face to do with the business of persuading the recalcitrant Dilbians into a partnership? If that was indeed the aim, as Joshua Guy had said.

John swung out of the pile of boughs and to his feet. One Man, he decided, owed him a few more — and plainer — answers.

He went softly down the length of the dormitory and through the door into the common room of the Inn.

There were few Dilbians about — they went early to bed. And One Man was also nowhere to be seen. He had not come into the dormitory, John knew. So either he had separate quarters, or else he had stepped outside for some reason . . .

John Tardy crossed the room and slipped out through the Inn entrance. He paused to accustom his eyes to the darkness and moved off from the building to get away from the window light. Slowly the night took shape around him, the wide face of the river running silver-dark in the faint light of the stars, and the clearing pooled in gloom.

He circled cautiously around

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the Inn to its back. Unlike Brittle Rock, the back yard here was clear of rubbish, sloping gradually to the river. It was given over to smaller huts and outbuildings. Among these the darkness was more profound and he felt his way cautiously.

Groping about in this fashion, quietly, but with some small, unavoidable noise, he saw a thin blade of yellow light. It cut through the parting of two leather curtains in the window of a hut close by him. He stepped eagerly toward it, about to peer through the crack, when, from deep wall shadow, a hand reached out and took his arm.

"Do you *want* to get yourself killed?" hissed a voice.

And, of course, it was human. And, of course, it spoke in Basic.

WHOEVER had hold of him drew him deeper into the shadow and away from the building where they stood. They came to another hut whose door stood ajar on an interior blackness, and John was led into this darkness. The hand let go of his arm. The door closed softly. There was a scratch, a sputter, and an animal-oil lamp burst into light within the place.

John squinted against the sudden illumination. When he could see again, he found himself looking into the face of one of the best-looking young women he had ever seen.

She was a good fifteen centimeters shorter than he, but at first glance looked taller by reason of her slim outline in the tailored overalls she wore. To John Tardy, after two days of Dilbians, she looked tiny — fragile. Her chestnut hair swept back in two wide wings on each side of her head. Her eyes were green above sharply marked cheekbones that gave her face a sculptured look. Her nose was thin, her lips firm rather than full, and her small chin was determined.

John blinked. "Who—?"

"I'm Ty Lamorc," she whispered fiercely. "Keep your voice down!"

"Ty Lamorc? *You?*"

"Yes, yes!" she said impatiently. "Now—"

"Are y-you sure?" stammered John. "I mean—"

"Who were you expecting to run into way out here in — oh, I see!" She glared at him. "It's that Greasy Face name the Dilbians gave me. You were expecting some horror."

"Certainly not," said John stoutly.

"Well, for your information, they just happened to see me putting on makeup one day. That's where the name came from."

"Well, naturally. I didn't think it was because—"

"I'll bet! Anyway, never mind that now. The point is, what are

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you doing out here? Do you *want* to get knocked on the head?"

"Who'd knock—" John Tardy stiffened. "The Terror's here!"

"No, no!" She sounded annoyed. "Boy Is-She-Built is."

"Oh." John frowned. "You know, I still don't get it — her angle on all this, I mean."

"She loves him, of course," said Ty Lamorc. "Actually, they make an ideal couple, by Dilbian standards. Now let's get you back to the Inn before she catches you. She won't follow you in there. You're a Guest."

"Now wait—" John took a deep breath. "This is silly. I came out here to find you. I've found you. Let's head back right now. Not to Humrog—"

"You don't," interrupted Ty with feeling, "understand a blasted thing about these people, Half Pint—I mean, Tardy."

"John."

"John, you don't understand the situation. The Streamside Terror left me here with Boy-Is-She-Built because I was slowing him down. That Hill Bluffer of yours is too fast for him, and he wanted to be sure to be in his own clan-country before you caught up with him, in case there would be—" her voice faltered a little—"repercussions to what happens when you meet. It's all a matter of honor, and that's the point. *You're a piece of mail, John.* Don't you understand? The Hill Bluffer's honor is involved, too."

"Oh," said John. He was silent for a while. "You mean he'd insist on delivering me?"

"What do you think?"

"I see." John was silent again. "Well, to blazes with it," he said at last. "Maybe we can make it across a bridge and cut the ropes and get away from it all. We can't leave you here."

Ty Lamorc did not reply at once. When she did, it was with a pat on his arm.

"You're nice," she said softly. "I'll remember that. Now get back to the Inn." And then she had blown out the lamp and he could hear her go.

NEXT morning, One Man was still nowhere to be seen. Nor, in the half hour that elapsed before they got going, did John Tardy catch any glimpse of Ty, or a female Dilbian who might be Boy Is-She-Built. He mounted into the Hill Bluffer's mailbag with his mind still engrossed by the happenings of the night before, and it continued to be engrossed as they began their third day of journey.

They were descending now into a country of lower altitudes, though they were still in hill country. The ground was more gently hollowed and crested, and several new varieties of trees appeared.

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But John had no time to consider this. He rode through the cool hours of the morning and into noon's heat still trying to find a common solution to the riddles that occupied his mind — about One Man, about the abduction of Ty Lamorc, and about his own peculiar lack of briefing.

"Tell me," said John finally to the Hill Bluffer, "is it a fact no other Dilbian could break that stick of One Man's that same way?"

"Nobody ever can," replied the Bluffer, as they rounded a small hill and plunged through a thin belt of trees. "Nobody ever will."

"Well, you know," said John, "back where I come from, we have a trick with something called a phone directory—"

He stopped. For the Hill Bluffer himself had stopped, with a jolt that almost pitched John from the mailbag. John sat up, looked around the Dilbian's head — and stared.

They had passed through the woods. They had emerged into a small valley in which a cluster of buildings stood in the brown color of their peeled and weathered logs, haphazardly about a stream that ran the valley's length. Beyond these houses there was a sort of natural amphitheater made by a curved indentation of the far rock wall of the valley. Past this the path went when it emerged from between the buildings and plunged into the trees again.

However, none of this claimed John's attention after the first second. He blinked, instead, at a living wall of five large Dilbians with axes.

"Who do you think you're stopping?" bellowed the Hill Bluffer.

"Clan Hollow's in full meeting," responded the central axeman. "The Great-Grandfathers want to see you both. You come with us."

The axemen formed around the Bluffer and John. They led off down and through the village and beyond to the amphitheater that was swarming with Dilbians of all ages. Several hundred of them were there, and more accumulating, below a ledge of rock where six ancient Dilbians sat.

"This is the mail!" stormed the Hill Bluffer as soon as they were close. "Listen, you Clan Hollows—"

"Be quiet, postman!" snapped the old Dilbian at the extreme right of the line as it faced John and the Bluffer. "Your honor will be guarded. Call the meeting."

"Great-Grandfathers of Clan Hollows, sitting in judgment upon a point of honor!" chanted a young Dilbian standing just below the ledge. He repeated the cry six times.

THERE was a stir in the crowd. Looking around, John saw Ty Lamorc. With her was a plump

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young female that was most likely Boy-Is-She-Built. Boy-Is-She-Built was currently engaged in herding Ty to the foot of the ledge. She accomplished this and immediately began talking.

"I'm Boy Is She-Built," she announced.

"We know you," said the Great-Grandfather on the right end.

"I'm speaking here for the Streamside Terror, who's waiting over at Glenn Hollow for the Shorty known as the Half Pint Posted. That Shorty over there. His mug has been spilled—the Terror's, I mean. This Shorty belongs to him — the male over there, I mean. Not that this female Shorty here with me doesn't belong to him, too. He took her fair and square, and it serves those Shorties right. After all, nobody has more honor than the Terror—"

"That's enough," said the judge. "We will decide—"

"I should think you wouldn't even have to call a meeting over it. After all, it's perfectly plain—"

"I said *that's enough!* Be quiet, female!" roared the end judge.

"Well?" interjected one of the other judges testily. "We've heard the arguments. The Shorties are both here. What's left to say?"

"Can I speak?" boomed a new voice, and the crowd parted to let One Man come up before the ledge of rock. The Great-Grandfathers thawed visibly as only great men can in the company of their peers.

"One Man is always welcome to speak," piped an ancient who had not spoken before, and whose voice, with age, had risen almost to the pitch of a human baritone.

"Thank you," said One Man. He raised his head and his voice rose with it, carrying easily out over the assembled Dilbians. "Just think this over. That's what I've got to say. Think deep about it—because it may be Clan Hollows' decision here is going to be binding on just about everybody — us and Shorties alike."

He waved to the judges and went back into the crowd.

"Thanks, One Man," said the right-end judge. "Now, having heard from everybody important who had something to say, here's our opinion. This is a matter concerning the honor of the Streamside Terror—"

"How about me?" roared the Hill Bluffer. "The mail must—"

"Hold your jaw about the mail!" snapped the right-end judge. "As I was saying, Terror's mug was spilled by the Guest in Humrog. Quite properly, the Terror then spilled the mug of the Guest by stealing off one of the Guest's household. This by itself is a dispute between individuals not touching Clan Hollows. But now here comes along a Shorty who wants to fight Terror for the stolen

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Shorty. And the question is, can Clan Hollows honorably allow the Terror to do so?"

HE paused for a moment, as if to let the point sink in on the crowd.

"For us to do this in honor," he continued, "the combat mentioned must be a matter of honor. And this point arises—is honor possible between a man and a Shorty? We Great-Grandfathers have sat up a full night finding an answer, and to do so we have had to ask ourselves, 'What *is* a Shorty?' That is, is it the same thing as us, a being capable of having honor and suffering its loss?"

He paused again. The crowd muttered its interest.

"A knotty question," said the spokesman, with a touch of complacency in his voice. "But your Great-Grandfathers have settled it."

The crowd murmured this time in admiration.

"What makes honor?" demanded the spokesman rhetorically. "Honor is a matter of rights — rights violated and rights protected. Have the Shorties among us had any rights? Guest-rights, only. Failing Guest-rights, can one imagine a Shorty defending and maintaining its rights in our world?"

A chortle broke out in the crowd and spread through its listening ranks at the picture conjured up.

"Silence!" snapped another of the judges. "This is *not* a house-raising."

The crowd went silent.

"Your display of bad manners," said the right-end judge severely, "has pointed up the same conclusion we came to — by orderly process of discussion. It is ridiculous to suppose a Shorty existing as an honor-bound equal in our world. Accordingly, the rules of honor are not binding. Both Shorties here will be returned unharmed to the Guest in Humrog. The Terror has lost no honor. The matter is closed."

He stood up. So did the other five Great-Grandfathers.

"This meeting," he said, "is ended."

"Not yet it isn't!" bellowed the Hill Bluffer.

He plunged forward to the edge of the rock bench, hauling John Tardy along by the slack in John's jacket.

"What do you all know about Shorties?" he demanded. "I've seen this one in action. When a bunch of drunks at Brittle Rock tried to make him do tricks like a performing animal, he fooled them all and got away. How's that for defending his honor? On our way here, the Knobby Gorge Bridge was cranked up out of our reach. He risked his neck climbing up to get it down again,

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so's not to be slowed in getting his paws on the Terror. How's that for a willingness to defend his rights? I say this Shorty here's as good as some of us any day. Maybe he isn't any bigger'n a two-year-old baby," roared the Hill Bluffer, "but I'm here today to tell you he's all guts!"

He spun on John. "How about it, Shorty? You want Greasy Face handed back to you like scraps from a plate —"

John's long cogitations at last paid off. These and something just witnessed in the Clan Meeting had thrown the switch he had been hunting for.

"Show me that skulking Terror!" he shouted.

THE words had barely passed his lips when he felt himself snatched up. The free air whistled past his face. The Hill Bluffer had grabbed him in two huge hands and was now running toward the far woods with him, like a football player with a ball. A roar of voices followed them; looking back, John saw the whole of Clan Hollows in pursuit.

John blinked. He was being jolted along at something like fifty kilometers an hour, and the crowd was coming along behind at the same rate. Or were they? For a long second, John hesitated, then allowed himself to recognize the inescapable fact. All praise to the postman — the Bluffer was outrunning them!

John felt the thrill of competition in his own soul. He and the Hill Bluffer might be worlds apart biologically, but, by heaven, when it came to real competition . . .

Abruptly, the shadow of the further forest closed about them. The Hill Bluffer ran on dropped needles from the conifers, easing to a lope. John Tardy climbed over his shoulder into the mailbag and hung on.

The forest muffled the roar of pursuit. They descended one side of a small hollow and, coming up the other, the Bluffer dropped to his usual ground-eating walk. On the next downslope, he ran again. And so he continued, alternating his pace as the ground shifted.

"How far to the Terror?" asked John.

"Glen Hollow," puffed the Hill Bluffer. He gave the answer in Dilbian units that worked out to just under eight kilometers.

About ten minutes later, they broke through a small fringe of trees to emerge over the lip of a small cuplike valley containing a meadow split by a stream which, in the meadow's center, spread into a pool. The pool was a good fifty meters across and showed the sort of color that indicates a fair depth. By the poolside, a male Dilbian was just looking up at the sound of their approach.

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John leaned forward and said quietly to the Hill Bluffer, "Put me down by the deepest part of the water." Reaching to his waist, he loosened the buckle of the belt threaded through the loops on his pants.

The Hill Bluffer grunted and continued his descent. At the water's margin, some dozen meters from the waiting Dilbian, he stopped.

"Hello, postman," said the Dilbian.

"Hello, Terror," answered the Bluffer. "Mail."

The Terror looked curiously past the Bluffer's head at John.

"So that's the Half Pint Posted, is it?" he said. "They let you come?"

"No, we just came," said the Bluffer.

While the Terror stared at John Tardy, John had been examining the Terror. The other Dilbian did not, at first glance, seem to live up to his reputation. He was big, but nowhere near the height of the Hill Bluffer, nor the awe-inspiring massiveness of One Man. John noted, however, with an eye which had judged physical capabilities among his own race, the unusually heavy boning of the other's body, the short, full neck, and, more revealing than any of these, the particularly *poised* balance exhibited by the Terror's thick body.

JOHN Tardy threw one quick glance at the water alongside and slid down from the Bluffer's back. The Bluffer moved off and, with no attempt at the amenities, the Streamside Terror charged.

John turned and dived deep into the pool.

He expected the Terror to follow him immediately, reasoning the other was too much the professional fighter to take chances, even with a Shorty. And, indeed, the water-shock of the big body plunging in after John made him imagine the Terror's great clawed hands all but scratching at his heels. John stroked desperately for depth and distance. He did have a strategy of battle, but it all depended on time and elbow room. He changed direction underwater, angled up to the surface, and, flinging the water from his eyes with a jerk of his head, looked around him.

The Terror, looking the other way, had just broken water four meters off.

John dived again and proceeded to get rid of boots, pants and jacket. He came up again practically under the nose of the Terror and was forced to dive once more. But this time, as he went down, he trailed from one fist the belt he had taken from his trousers, waving in the water like a dark stem of weed.

Coming up the third time at a

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fairly safe distance, John discovered the Terror had spotted him and was coming after him. John grinned to himself and dived, as if to hide again. But under the water he changed direction and swam directly at his opponent. He saw the heavy legs and arms churning toward him overhead. They moved massively but relatively slowly through the water, and in this he saw the final proof he needed. He had guessed that, effective as the Terror might be against other Dilbians, in the water his very size made him slow and clumsy in comparison to a human — in possibly all but straightaway swimming.

Now John let his opponent pass him overhead. Then, as it went by, he grabbed the foot. And pulled.

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The Terror instinctively checked and dived. John, flung surfaceward, let go and dived — this time behind and above the Dilbian. He saw the great back, the churning arms, and then, as the Terror turned once more toward the surface, John closed in, passing the belt around the thick neck and twisting its leather length tight.

At this the Terror, choking, should have headed toward the surface, giving John a chance to breathe. The Dilbian did, John got his breath—and there the battle departed from John's plan entirely.

John had simply failed to give his imagination full rein. He had, in spite of himself, been thinking of the Dilbian in human terms — as a very big man, a man with vast but not inconceivable strength.

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It is not inconceivable to strangle a giant man with a belt. But how conceivable is it to strangle a grizzly?

John was all but out of reach, stretched at arm's-length by his grip on the belt, trailing like a lamprey attached to a lake trout. But now and then the Terror's huge hand, beating back at him through the water, brushed against him. Only brushed — but each impact slammed John about like a chip in the water. His head rang. The water roared about him. His shoulder numbed to a blow and his ribs gave to another.

His senses began to fog; and he tightened his grip on the belt — for it was, in the end, kill or be killed. If he did not do for the Terror, there was no doubt the Terror would . . . do for . . . him . . .

CHOKING and gasping, he found his hands no longer on the belt, but clawing at the grassy edge of the pond. Hands were helping him. He pulled himself up on the slippery margin. His knees found solid ground. He coughed water and was suddenly, ungracefully sick. Then he blacked out.

He came around after an indeterminate time to find his head in someone's lap. He blinked upward and a blur of color slowly turned into the face of Ty Lamorc, very white and taut — and crying.

"What?" he croaked.

"Oh, shut up!" she said. She was wiping his damp face with a rag of cloth that was nearly as wet as he was.

"No—" he managed. "I mean—what're *you* doing here?" He tried to sit up.

"Lie down!"

"I'm all right — I think." He struggled into sitting position. The whole area of Glen Hollow, he saw, was aswarm with Dilbians. A short way off, a knot of them were gathered on the pool-bank around something.

"What—?" he began.

"The Terror, Half Pint," said a familiar voice, and he looked up at the looming figure of the Hill Bluffer, mountainous from this angle. "He's still out. It's your fight, all right." He went off, and they could hear him informing the other group down the bank that the Shorty was up and talking.

John Tardy looked at Ty.

"What happened?" he asked.

"They had to pull him out. You made it to shore by yourself." She found a handkerchief somewhere, wiped her eyes and blew her nose vigorously. "You were wonderful."

"*Wonderful?*" said John, still too groggy for subtlety. "I was out of my head to even think of it!" He felt his ribs gingerly. "I better get back to Humrog and have an X-ray of this side."

"Oh, are your ribs broken?"

"Maybe just bruised. Wow!"

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said John, coming on an especially tender spot.

"Oh!" wept Ty. "You might have been killed! And it's all my fault!"

"*Your* fault?" said John. He spotted the massive figure of One Man breaking away from the group around the fallen Terror and hissed quickly at her. "Hurry. Help me up." She assisted him clumsily to his feet. "Tell me, did they find anything around the Terror's neck when they pulled him out?"

SHE stared at him and wiped her eyes. "Why, no. What should they find around his neck?"

"Nothing," whispered John. "Well!" he said as One Man rolled up to a halt before them. "What do *you* think of the situation?"

"I think, Half Pint," said One Man, "that it's all very interesting. Very interesting indeed. I think you Shorties may be getting a few takers now on this business of going off into the sky and learning things."

"You do, eh? How about you, for one?"

"No-o," said One Man slowly. "No, I don't think me. I'm a little too old to jump at new things that quick. Some of the young ones'll be ready, though. The Terror, for one, possibly. He's quite a bright lad, you know. Of course, now that you've done the preliminary spade-work, I may put in a good word for you people here and there."

"Mighty nice of you — *now*," said John, a little bitterly.

"Nothing wins like a winner, Half Pint," rumbled One Man. "You Shorties should have known that. Matter of fact, I'm surprised it took you so long to show some common sense. You just don't come in and sit down at a man's table and expect him to take your word for it that you're one of the family. As I said to you once before, who asked you Shorties to come here, anyway, in the first place? And what made you think we had to like you? What if, when you were a lad, some new kid moved into your village? He was half your size, but he had a whole lot of shiny new playthings you didn't have, and he came up and tapped you on the shoulder and said, 'C'mon, from now on we'll play *my* sort of game!' How'd you think *you'd* have felt?"

He eyed John shrewdly out of his hairy face.

"I see," said John, after a moment. "Then why'd you help me?"

"Me? Help you? I was as neutral as they come. What're you talking about?"

"We've got something back home called a phone directory — a book like those manuals Little Bite has down at Humrog. It's about this thick—" he measured with thumb and forefinger. "And

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for one of us Shorties, you'd say it was a physical impossibility to pick it up and tear it in two. But some of us can do it." He eyed One Man. "Of course, there's a trick to it."

"Well, now," said One Man judiciously, "I can believe it. Directories, thick sticks, or first-class hill-and-alley scrappers — there's a trick to handle almost any of them. Not that I'd ever favor a Shorty over any of us in the long run — don't get that idea." He looked around them. The Streamside Terror was being helped out of the Glen and most of the crowd was already gone. "We'll have to get together for a chat one of these days, Half Pint. Well, see you in the near future, Shorties."

JOHN Tardy wiped a damp nose with the back of his hand and stared after One Man. Then he turned to Ty Lamorc.

"Now," he said, "what'd you mean — it was all your fault?"

"It was," she said miserably. "It was all my idea. Earth knew we weren't getting through to the Dilbians, so they sent me out. And I—" she gulped — "I recommended they send out a man who conformed as nearly as possible to the Dilbian psychological profile and we'd get him mixed up in a Dilbian emotional situation — to convince them we weren't the utter little aliens we seemed to be. They've got a very unusual culture here. They really have. I never thought Boy-Is-She-Built would catch up with you and nearly kill you and take your wrist-phone away. You were supposed to be able to stay in contact with Joshua Guy so he could always rescue you from the other end."

"I see. And why," queried John, very slowly and patiently, "did you decide not to let *me* in on what was going on?"

"Because," she wailed, "I thought it would be better for you to react like the Dilbians in a natural, extroverted, uncerebral way!"

"I see," said John again. They were still standing beside the pool. He picked her up — she was quite light and slender — and threw her in. There was a shriek and a satisfying splash. John turned and walked off.

After half a dozen steps, he slowed down, turned and went back. She was clinging to the bank.

"Here," he said gruffly, extending his hand.

"Thag you," she said humbly, with her nose full of water, as he hauled her out.

— GORDON R. DICKSON

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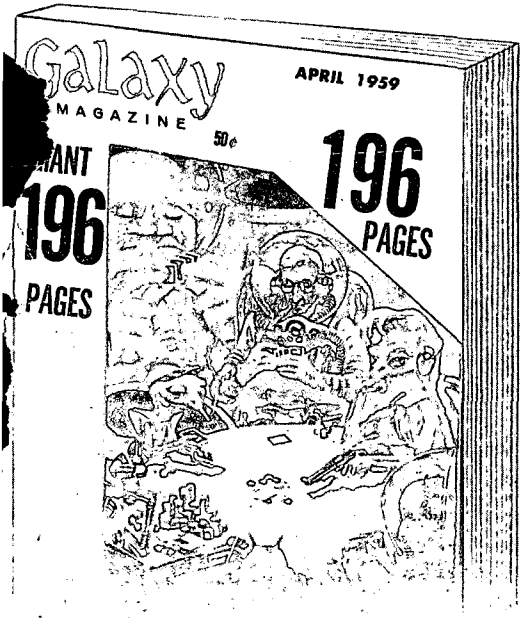

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(Continued from page 7)

you. If you had voted for many little stories at the cost of large ones, we'd have had no choice but to demand terse — even if painfully terse — handlings.

We're grateful that many of you pointed out the time factor in reading. A. H. Feldman of Los Angeles, Cal., speaks for a sizable and hurried group: "Please leave in the short stories as I can easily scan one in a break or lunch hour," and Dorothy B. Sommers of Mayville, N. Y., explains harrowingly just why a mother of three boys had better have a passion for short stories or give up reading altogether.

WE had no intention of not using short stories; they're too important for editorial balance, a word that, thanks to those who bothered to say why, now has temporal as well as length and theme meaning.

• How, we asked, about serials? The best solution — running them complete in one issue—we showed to be financially impossible for authors: books, reprint and club publishers won't touch novels that have appeared uncut in single issues. That applies whether we are discussing GALAXY or GALAXY NOVELS, which some readers suggested as a way out of the problem. If we're going to have book-lengths, they must be serialized — and we asked our readers to consider, before voting, whether they would have wanted to miss the book-lengths we have run.

And consider they did, for the really immense majority wants serials. We are all unhappy about the wait, but it's either that or no book-lengths.

Well, no, not none at all; there are always seconds and factory rejects that can be had for the whistling, but not the top-notchers. Magazine earnings, especially from GALAXY, enable writers to turn good-enough books into the best they can produce.

We'll hold the serials down to two installments, as promised. It means a two-month wait — but isn't that a gain over the third of a year needed for four-parters?

• What, we asked, do you think of articles? Is our science department a good solution?

Here again the choice is unmistakable: Willy Ley's "For Your Information" gets a mandate. The suggestions made for improving it still further will be heeded: more speculation, return of the "Any Questions?" section, and wider range of subjects.

"Any Questions?" became a real problem—the scientifically literate and semi-literate, after a first burst of enthusiasm, left it entirely to the untutored, and how many times could Ley explain that rockets do not push against air,

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and the like? If you want a department that depends on you for support, it seems logical that you should support it, no? Keep queries coming and it will flourish. Relinquish it and it'll wither and die, same as before.

• Your editor bafflledly admits that his editorials seem liked and consents to go on writing them. His reluctance was neither laziness nor modesty. Being a devout entertainer, he lives in horror of lecturing and talking through his hat, the two greatest pitfalls of editorializing. His attempts to scrabble out of said pitfalls do not always succeed, and they feel less often than that — but you ought to see him chucking away ideas that lead to these temptations, and whacking out the incipient boredoms or sillinesses that obstinately creep into all editorials.

BUT if the editorials are liked, he asks, how come writing them feels like trying to hold a spirited conversation with a dead phone? Why, he persists, doesn't somebody answer? So, when you hear an editorial ringing, pick it up. It's for you.

• The vote on the letter column couldn't have been clearer in 1950. It couldn't be more deadlocked than now — almost exactly half against and half for. The deciding factor is actually the same as the one that will make "Any Questions?" prosper or fall — your support, if you are among the many who want a letter column, or leaving it by default to the —

Well, here is the place to comment on the crabs among us mentioned earlier, and the shock received each time we find them statistically so insignificant.

At any given time, there are no more than 200 or so active, in the volcanic sense, letter writers. Some are loves — a few, like H. M. Sycamore, nothing short of living snookies. But the steaming, fuming, roaring most of them won't get off people's ears, editors' least of all. They take over letter columns only if nobody else is around, for no editor prefers their livid lava — they're always mad: mad for, mad at, or just plain mad — to sensible mail from reasonable human beings whom everyone is glad to hear from.

We intended at this point to include some samples, decided not to; why quease stomachs unnecessarily? Besides, you've seen enough in their occupied columns. What you can't really realize is how strenuously they have been prettied up for you in editing. Worse than unprintable, they are unspeakable.

No, we had no intention ever of letting these quarrelsome oafs dominate any letter department in GALAXY. Nor is the alternative no letter department. Not with so

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many intelligent readers to chat, bull or fun around with. Agree? Apparently 50% of you do. Now let's hear from you — and keep hearing, for the column can exist only as long as you write to it.

• How, we inquired, about our book reviews? Another clear majority, including endorsement of the tone that was deliberately set in advance — one early voter's letter, put aside for quote, got quickly drifted over and buried and would need a rescue expedition to be uncovered, so our apologies for a nameless citation from memory: "It's not easy to locate science fiction and related books in my town and Mr. Gale's reviews make a very useful shopping list."

Shopping list, not public execution block, is what we intended the department to be; now, as many readers request, we are reinstating coverage of paperbound books to extend its usefulness. Since these are all but completely reprints, they will be reviewed briefly — no sense in discussing titles twice and sometimes more.

Speaking for a hungry little crowd is Bruce Pelz, Tampa, Fla., who says: "Put more teeth in the reviews!" Sorry, Mr. P., this field has an exportable surplus of fanged critics, bunnies in company, sabertooth rabbits in print. We feel that as long as an author is writing, even if badly, there's a chance he'll improve, none at all if he is nipped and nagged into stopping. Gale will evaluate books as buys, not their authors' taste in shirts, or in relation to James Joyce, or in terms of Gypsy Dreambook symbology.

• Many readers want covers tied to stories, but many like our oddball ones, so we'll try to please both factions. And we aim to dress up layouts and art still more.

• Reprinting some of our early stories, available nowhere else, got a mixed vote. We'll see if we can't come up with a solution favorable to all.

ON the really big policies, we have just about enough to go on, and we mean to go on it, at least until we hear otherwise, for the voting continues.

There was some confusion about our math — half again as much magazine for only 15¢ more. We meant 50% as much again as our 130-page competitors. But the whole thing is in process of change even as this is written, with some titles going out of business, others increasing price, and the rest watching us very closely before deciding what to do.

They will have to watch us even more narrowly than they are doing, though. For the plans we have in mind will cause them — and you — the utmost damned astonishment!

— H. L. GOLD

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